YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRDS AT LAKE KOSHKONONG AND VICINITY

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The yellow-headed blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) is essentially a western bird. Chas. Lucian Bonaparte, in his "American Ornithology" published in 1825, Thomas Nuttall in his "Birds of the United States and Canada," Vol. 1 published in 1832, and John Audubon, in his "Ornithological Biography" published in 1839, all agree that this bird was added to the fauna of North America in 1819 and 1820 by Major S. H. Long on his expedition to the Rocky mountains. Long before this it had been known as an inhabitant of South America and was generally known as the yellow-headed troupial. Bonaparte speaks of it as a bird of the far west and says, "It does not visit the settled parts of the United States." Thomas Nuttall says, "Its visits in the United States are yet wholly confined to the west side of the Mississippi, beyond which not even a straggler has been seen." Audubon in his "Birds of North America," also speaks of it as not being found east of the Mississippi. In fact when this work was published in 1842 he had never seen the bird alive, his first meeting with it being in May 1843 on his memorable boat trip up the Missouri.

My interest in the history of these birds at Lake Koshkonong was first awakened by reading the following information which I found on a scrap of paper in an old trunk of papers which belonged to my grandfather Thure Kumlien. It was a part of a first copy of a letter which he had written to Dr. Thomas Brewer of Boston, Mass. in 1851, who afterwards became a noted ornithologist, and reads, "Two weeks ago I sent you some birds' eggs and some skins of the Xanthocephalus. The nest and eggs of the Xanthocephalus I could not find although I visited the place three different times, and I assure you I did my utmost in

searching for them. The place where they breed or where I suppose they breed, because I found them there and nowhere else (in the water) among reeds so high that when I shoved my boat along I could not see over them. Then I waded in the water, which was over my knees and pushed the boat before me. So you see it was very tedious work. I saw a great many Xanthocephalus. I shot some but they were mostly males, which shows that they are nesting somewhere. I sent you only one female. The males are differently marked and are of different sizes. The males vary in length from 9½ to 10¾ in. The females are from 8½ to 8¾ at the most. They did not seem to care a deal for my presence. Sometimes I was within ten feet of them. The note of the male is something between the note of the redwing and a young rooster, the latter part of the notes being very hoarse. It sounds as if he were endeavoring to get out something nice. The commencement goes well enough but comes very near choking him before he gets through." Another first copy of a letter to Dr. Brewer was found, the date being either 1852 or 1853, I think 1852 judging by other letters and references. In this he again refers to the yellow-headed blackbird and says, "I went over to the Lake the other day on an egg excursion and found that the Xanthocephalus had not yet laid their eggs. I saw several but they did not seem to have any attachment to any certain place nor did I see a nest. I shot one female. She had an egg in her about the size of a kernel of corn and four smaller ones. If nothing hinders me I will go there again in a week or two. I have hopes of getting their eggs and learning more about their manners."

On another paper I found a list of the birds that Mr. Kumlien had seen on the west shore of Lake Koshkonong in 1850 and the yellow-headed blackbird was one of the list. Mr. Kumlien came from Sweden in 1843 and settled at this lake. In another letter he writes, "For the first six months of my residence here I was out nearly every day with my gun." So it may be possible that he saw this bird before 1850, but I have no record that he did.

On November 28, 1851, Dr. Brewer writes Mr. Kumlien that he received the letter a few days since and that the box came two weeks later by express. This first letter to

Dr. Brewer then was evidently written in October or early November. After reading Dr. Brewer's reply I find that the eggs and nests were not found that season. After some interesting comments on the different eggs received, Dr. Brewer writes, "I think considering how much difficulty you had in consequence of the great rains, that you did remarkably well. I well know how much rainy weather coming just at the breeding season spoils ones opportunities. I was sorry you were not able to find the breeding places of the Icterus xanthocephalus (former name of this bird) the black-tern and others that you had hoped to, but perhaps another season you will be more fortunate." In January 1852 Mr. Kumlien wrote to Dr. Brewer, "I have every reason to believe that the coming season I will find the eggs of some rare birds." On this list of rare birds I find that of the yellow-headed blackbird. In another first copy of a letter written to Dr. Brewer in Sept. 29, 1856, I find, "The Lake that for two or three years back has been very high in summer, has this summer been so low that where I used to pick the eggs of gallinules, black-terns, and yellow-headed blackbirds, it was perfectly dry, and not a nest of those birds to be seen and but a very small number of the birds themselves."

In 1853 George B. Warren of Troy, N. Y. an acquaintance of Dr. Brewer, ordered skins and eggs from a list which Mr. Kumlien had sent him of what could be furnished from around Lake Koshkonong. Mr. Warren writes, "You say you have *Icterus xanthocephalus* with you, I do not find it under this name in Audubon, therefore do not know what you mean, but skin a pair for me male and female." Mr. Warren evidently had the second edition of Mr. Audubon's work published in 1842. In his "Birds of America" Audubon calls the bird (the yellow-headed troopial) Agelaius xanthocephalus. In a footnote in this second edition, Mr. Audubon mentions the fact that in the first edition he called the bird *Icterus xanthocephalus*. Mr. Warren must have overlooked the footnote. In 1858 Spencer Baird named the bird *Icterus* Icterocephalus *xanthocephalus* which was adopted as final authority and followed by Coues in all editions of his "Key" until 1903, when the present designation *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* appears.

In a letter written late in July or early in August 1854 by Mr. Kumlien to Dr. Brewer, I find, "But as to the eggs for your self my dear sir, I am glad I can send you some good news—I have after several unsuccessful attempts to find the nests of the Xanthocephalus, now found it. I have a completed nest with eggs (four in number and quite unlike the *Icterus phoeniceus,* red-winged blackbird) for you. I found it only a few days before mid-June but at the same time large young ones had left the nests." In another letter from Mr. Kumlien to Dr. Brewer of Aug. 25, 1854 he writes, "Do you wish me to send you more than one nest of the yellow-headed blackbird? I have three nests. In two of them there was one egg apiece, and in the third nest were four eggs. So I have six eggs in all. Perhaps I had better send the whole six; they will be in good hands then."

Sometime during the last four years when Mr. Kumlien was so intent on finding the nests and eggs of this bird, someone else, probably some dealer in the East, must have sent Dr. Brewer eggs for the eggs of this bird, for he seems to have his doubts as to whether or not the eggs which he has are really those of the yellow-head for in his letter of Sept. 1854 in reply to Mr. Kumlien's of August 1854 he writes, "I am rejoiced that the problem in regard to the yellow-headed blackbird is at last to be solved—I feel confident that the eggs given me for the eggs of that bird are those of a pipilo or towhee finch and not of a troopial. Time will now know if my conjectures are right." Although I spent days going through the old musty papers in Grandfather's trunk I have not been able to find the next letter of Dr. Brewer's, but know from Dr. Brewer's publications that Mr. Kumlien sent him the correct nests and eggs.

In another letter from Mr. Kumlien to Dr. Brewer in regard to the price he is to receive for skins he says, "I am glad to get fifty cents apiece for the yellow-headed blackbird skins, and wish that I could sell many more for that price. It is easier for me to kill and skin a bird than it is to go out and work hard all day for a farmer for fifty cents." There seems to have been a rather good demand for these birds in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington D. C. due to the salesmanship of Dr. Brewer among his friends and other eastern ornithologists, until

he writes in about 1856 (the date not given on the letter), "The skins came safely, I shall do the best I can to sell them for you and at as high prices as I can. I should have been able to have done better for you than I shall now probably be able to do if these yellow-headed blackbird skins had not become rather common here, Mr. Bell, a dealer having brought a number from California. Still I hope to sell them for something—I have already sold three of them to a gentleman who agrees to give as high as I can get for the others." (During this time and until many years later it was fashionable to have mounted birds in the homes as ornaments).

In 1858 Spencer F. Baird refers in his "Birds of the Pacific R. R. Survey" to its range as Western America from Texas, Ill. and Wisconsin.

In speaking of the yellow-headed blackbird, Coues, in his "Birds of the Northwest," published in 1874 says, "I met with a few on the prairies of Wisconsin in April 1864, and the following month found it abundant in Kansas, and again in New Mexico, where thousands were breeding in a marshy place near Laguna, just west of the Rio Grande".

In 1864 Mr. Kumlien sent a collection of eggs to A. E. Samuels, author of "Birds of New England," among the list was that of the Yellow-headed blackbird. In this book, Mr. Samuels gives in his appendix that a yellow-headed blackbird was accidental in Watertown, Mass. in 1869.

In 1873 Mr. Kumlien sent a collection of eggs and nests to the museum of Comparative Zoology at Cambridge, Mass. Among the list I find that he sent two sets of nests and eggs of the yellow-headed blackbird. At this time Louis Agassiz was still at the head of this museum at Harvard which he had founded, but he died in Dec. 1873, a month after the collection was sent.

In "Birds of America" published in 1874 by Baird, Brewer and Ridgway, Dr. Brewer, who wrote the life histories of the birds, speaks of having received several nests of these blackbirds from Mr. Kumlien from the shores of Lake Koshkonong.

These birds are now found abundantly in northern Illinois where they breed by the thousands in the Calumet marshes. In a letter from Dr. Robert Ridgway, dated

March 12, 1926, he says that these birds do not come to the southern part of Illinois where he lives at Olney, not even as stragglers, and that he has not seen the bird alive since 1869 when he saw it in California, Nevada, and Utah. From time to time stragglers have been reported from Pennsylvania, Michigan, Indiana, Ontario, Quebec, Cuba, Florida and Maine which shows the wandering propensities of this bird.

The next information I have on this bird in Wisconsin is found in "Birds of Wisconsin" by Ludwig Kumlien and Ned Hollister which was published in 1903. Concerning the yellow-headed blackbird I find, "A summer resident. In some sections of the state the yellow-headed blackbird seems to be totally absent while on certain lakes it breeds abundantly. The species is apparently becoming more common in many localities where it was once almost unknown."

These birds have become so numerous around Lake Koshkonong that some years they are a nuisance. In the year 1916, Mr. Edward Altpeter planted a field which reached nearly to the shore with corn. While he was at work the birds came into the field in great flocks and pulled up the seed. He had his little daughter drive them away with sticks and he used the shotgun, but all to no avail. He had to replant the field. The seed was again all eaten by the birds until he gave up and planted the field to millet. Of late years, however, he is able to raise corn on this field and is not bothered by these blackbirds as they have not been there in such great numbers. Perhaps the reason for the disappearance of these birds in such numbers at this part of the shore is accounted for by the fact that the lowering of the dam on Rock river at Indian Ford has lowered the water in the marshes where these birds nested. (Lake Koshkonong is a widening of Rock river and is four miles wide and nine miles long.)

At Blackhawk club house on Lake Koshkonong, I have seen these birds walk about the lawn coming up to within a few feet of me where they were looking for worms in the grass. Of late years the yellow-heads are following the Bark, Crawfish and Rock rivers that empty into the lake.

Their nests have been found in limited numbers in the rushes along Bark river.

Five years ago an immense flock of female yellow-heads (they travel in separate flocks after incubation) was seen in our cornfield and orchard. They came into the yard and rested in the elms.

In a recent letter to the Biological Survey inquiring as to whether these birds return to the same locality to breed, I received the following reply from Mr. Fischer, acting chief of the Bureau, "So far as we know these birds return to the same locality or to one in the immediate vicinity year after year unless there is some particular reason for changing their breeding places."

On May 18, 1869, Ludwig Kumlien found the yellow-headed blackbirds nesting at Lake Koshkonong, so their time of nesting seems to depend upon the season.

On the fourteenth of June, 1925, Robert Glover, a student at Milton College, and myself banded blackbirds at Goodrich Lake, which is one mile out of Milton and about six miles from Lake Koshkonong. On this day many of the red-wings were leaving their nests and crawling up and down the reeds, while many yellow-heads were not yet hatched, and those that were were too small to band. The next week though there were yellow-heads in plenty. Both the red-wing and yellow-headed males were in the trees near the shores where their mates were incubating close by in their nests in the rushes above the water. They made a great noise, came as near as they dared, walked back and forth on the limbs with their wings out spread and objected strenuously to our handling the young birds. The male yellow-heads made a striking picture with their rich black plumage, white patch on wings and brilliant yellow or almost orange on heads, necks and breasts. The females were more brownish with paler lemon colored heads. A female yellow-head was climbing around on the reeds, her actions makng me think of a parrot.

The little lake was nearly covered with reeds and rushes and furnished nesting sites and protection for marsh wrens, least bitterns, coots, rails, and Florida gallinules, beside the two blackbirds, the black terns placing their eggs on the top of the old muskrat houses. The weird calls and cries

of the water birds mingling with the songs of the blackbirds made a harmonious and pleasant combination of sounds.

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