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NOTES ON SOME OF THE RARER BIRDS OF THE AMES REGION

H. E. EWING

While the writer was living at Ames during several past years he took various notes on birds observed in that vicinity. During the years 1917, 1918, 1919 and 1920, regular excursions were taken, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied with other bird enthusiasts and sometimes with his college students in bird study. It was only during the year 1919 that the writer taught the course in bird study for the Department of Zoology at the Iowa State College. While this course was taught by Professor H. A. Scullen and later by Professor J. E. Guthrie, the writer frequently accompanied the classes on field trips.

The area to which these notes pertain (with a few exceptions) includes a radius of about two miles around the college. In this radius are found cultivated fields, pastures, feed lots, woodlands, Squaw creek and a few of its tributaries, the college lake, a few ponds and smaller but permanent pools. The native trees are practically all deciduous, but on the plots of the Forestry Department there is a splendid growth of conifers. Some of these conifers are small, yet others are trees of a height ranging from fifteen to twenty-five feet. The writer has noticed some distinct changes in the bird life due to the recent growth of these conifers and those of the college campus not far distant which are much older and higher.

Included with the writer's records here given are some taken by Professor Guthrie, some by Professor Scullen and some by Mrs. Ewing. Those taken by Professor Guthrie are initialed (J. E. G.), by Professor Scullen (H. A. S.), while those taken by Mrs. Ewing and based upon her determination are initialed (B. R. E.). All records not followed by initials in parenthesis, or accredited to individuals named, are by the writer, and represent his own observations and determinations. Records by accompanying observers are not included in these notes unless given as an additional record, in which the observation was not the writer's.

The species treated are arranged into three lists: First, species supposed by many to be rare but in reality common at

Ames; second, species rare at Ames, *i. e.* either never seen in numbers or not seen at all during certain years; third, species doubtfully accredited to the Ames Region.

SPECIES COMMON AT AMES BUT SUPPOSED BY SOME TO
BE RARE

Belted Kingfisher

(*Ceryle alcyon*)

Kingfishers are present along the creeks about Ames every year, not in large numbers, for the habits of the bird are such that usually only a single pair is found at one place. They are frequently not observed by students in the college bird classes.

Barn Swallow

(*Hirundo erythrogaster*)

Every year the writer was at Ames, barn swallows were observed in numbers along Squaw creek north of the campus in the vicinity of the concrete bridge. Since the artificial lake has been constructed on the college campus, barn swallows have been found occasionally skimming over the surface of its waters.

Rough-winged Swallow

(*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

By far the most common swallow about the college campus is the rough-winged swallow, which can nearly always be found during the late spring and summer circling about the old gravel pit between the campus and the North Western tracks. This species is usually confused with its near relative the bank swallow (*Riparia riparia*) which also is found at Ames.

Cedar Waxwing

(*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

Almost every winter some excited person would rush up to the writer and in interrupted speech announce that some new birds were on the campus or that the waxwings had come. The cedar waxwing is one of our common birds at Ames as the following records show. Individuals seen as follows: 4, May 20, 1917; 45 (on the college campus), February 27, 1918; 12, March 17, 1918; 32, March 24, 1918; 8, March 31, 1918; 17, April 7, 1918; 4, June 2, 1918; 2, May 25, 1919; 4, May 29, 1920. These records are only the ones taken on regular field trips. The bird was so common that other records were not deemed sufficiently important to be put down.

SPECIES RELATIVELY RARE AT AMES

Pied-billed Grebe

(Podilymbus podiceps)

This grebe was not observed at Ames by the writer, and no records were brought to his notice until the artificial lake was made on the college campus. Since then the grebe has been seen probably every year. In 1921 Professor Guthrie had one as a captive for about two weeks. He writes as follows concerning it: "It was a very interesting specimen and caused more laughter than anything else we have ever had here. Its methods of walking reminded one of the first attempts of a young child. It would go faster and faster on these cement floors of Science Hall until finally it would slide into the corner on its breast."

Mallard

(Anas platyrhynchos)

During the writer's stay at Ames the mallard was not observed by him to light in the two mile radius of the college campus. On October 21, 1917, a flock of twenty-two was observed in flight overhead. A few miles south of Ames near Kelly the mallard is common during wet migration seasons. Five were observed here October 17, 1919. A few miles east of Ames also the mallard is found during migration.

Blue-winged Teal

(Querquedula discors)

While at Ames the writer flushed a blue-winged teal from the old gravel pit north of the campus. As soon as the bird was flushed I dropped to the ground on the bank and remained very quiet. The teal circled around and around for probably five minutes then with a lightning swoop it shot down to the very spot on the water from which it had sprung. In this position I viewed it at my leisure and to the very best of advantage. The teals are among the strongest of wing of all our ducks. Since the college lake was established the blue-wing has taken advantage of it.

Scaup Ducks

(Marila marila and M. affinis)

No records were obtained of the scaups stopping within the two mile radius previous to the construction of the college lake, although it is probable that some had alighted on Squaw creek. During the spring of 1918 scaups were seen for several days

on the campus lake. The writer has a record of two seen on April 28, 1918. Professor Guthrie reported seeing these two for several days, and has recently written the writer that the scaups have returned again to the lake. Whether the species was the greater or the lesser scaup was not determined. Such a determination seemed to defy all attempts.

Least Sandpiper
(*Pisobia minutilla*)

Professor Guthrie observed a pair of least sandpipers in the spring of 1921, and states that he watched them for an hour or more close at hand.

Solitary Sandpiper
(*Helodromas solitarius solitarius*)

This sandpiper is probably more common at Ames than is usually supposed, but is very frequently confused with the spotted sandpiper. Records as follows: 1, May 24, 1917; 1, May 27, 1917; 1, May 30, 1917; 1, spring of 1921 (J. E. G.).

Bob-white
(*Colinus virginianus virginianus*)

The only place near the college where the writer has found the bob-white is just south of town near the country club. Here for several years a few bob-whites were found. During the spring of 1917 the writer heard them several times but never saw more than a few individuals at one time. In the last two or three years bob-whites have increased at Ames according to Professor Guthrie who states: "We flushed several coveys of half a dozen or more last year (1921) in the north woods." The fall of 1921 was one of almost unprecedented abundance of several kinds of game birds over much of the United States. This was particularly true of the quail. The writer never saw anything like the abundance of quail in his life as was seen in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas in the month of October. This abundance was attributed in part to recent legislation in various states increasing the protection of quail, but was probably due more to the very mild and favorable season for the rearing of the brood.

Sharp-shinned Hawk
(*Accipiter velox*)

Seen once by Professor Guthrie who observed one individual from the Zoology Laboratory window. The bird had perched

in a willow near the Veterinary Buildings. This specimen remained on the same limb for about two hours.

Sparrow Hawk

(*Falco sparverius sparverius*)

Common in Iowa but, strange to say, the sparrow hawk does not appear to be common at Ames. It was reported twice. One was seen April 28, 1918 (B. R. E.) and a pair was observed April 6, 1919.

Barn Owl

(*Aluco pratincola*)

The writer obtained no record for the barn owl. They were observed, however, in the larch grove in 1921 (J. E. G.).

Long-eared Owl

(*Asio wilsonianus*)

The only evidence of the presence of this owl at Ames was obtained by Professor Guthrie who found the feathers of one under a tree which evidently was the haunt of a barred owl.

Short-eared Owl

(*Asio flammeus*)

Short-eared owls were observed flying about during the fall of 1921, according to Professor Guthrie, who states that one was shot near the dairy farm. This specimen is now in the college museum.

Barred Owl

(*Strix varia varia*)

Although this species is very common in parts of Iowa only a single questionable record for this large predator was obtained. During the latter part of April, 1919, several persons reported the seeing of a large owl. On April 25, 1919, Dr. Fenton, of the Zoology Department, reported seeing an owl "larger than a crow." Judging from the description he gave, this owl must have been the barred owl.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

(*Archilochus colubris*)

The abundance of the ruby-throat in any locality is largely dependent upon the prevalence of such nectar-producing flowers as the honeysuckle. Flowers of this kind are not plentiful at Ames, and where they occur they are usually cultivated. Records;

one seen many times around honeysuckle where I roomed during the fall of 1915; one seen June 19, 1918; a male seen May 12, 1920 (B. R. E.).

Arkansas Kingbird

(*Tyrannus verticalis*)

Professor Scullen reported observing the Arkansas kingbird at Ames. It was observed before the year 1919, probably either 1917 or 1918. I know of no other record for this species.

Bobolink

(*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*)

Until recent years the bobolink was observed at Ames. During the period from 1914 to 1920 not a single individual was seen by the writer and no records for it were reported to him. However, he thought he heard one on the college campus May 5, 1918.

Orchard Oriole

(*Icterus spurius*)

Now rare at Ames, although possibly common in former times. The only record the writer has obtained for this oriole is for May 22, 1920, when one was seen at rather close range in the north woods along Squaw creek. In the past Professor Guthrie has obtained several records of the orchard oriole.

Purple Finch

(*Carpodacus purpureus purpureus*)

The purple finch is known at Ames as a transient visitor. A flock of twenty-four was observed May 6, 1917, feeding on the tender buds and bloom of trees along the left bank of Squaw creek. In this flock only three individuals showed the deep purple of postnuptial plumage. One male seen April 12, 1920 (B. R. E.), and a very large flock (two hundred estimated) seen April 19, 1920 (B. R. E.). This flock was observed at the western end of town along the corporation limits. The birds were in the trees and some of them were singing even during an April shower. Most of the individuals lacked the rose purple characteristic of the older males.

White-Winged Crossbill

(*Loxia leucoptera*)

On February 15, 1920, Dr. Charles Murray found a dead male specimen with red plumage and took it to the Zoology Depart-

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ment. Professor Guthrie showed me the specimen and stated that Dr. Murray had seen this one individual with two others for several days before it had died.

Lapland Longspur

(*Calcarius lapponicus lapponicus*)

Seen once and then in large numbers. Several flocks were observed late in the afternoon of February 24, 1918, in the conifers of the Forestry Department. The day was clear, no wind, some snow on the ground, temperature at 6:20 P.M., 49° F.

On February 21, 1919, a specimen in winter plumage was sent in by M. L. Seder from Huron, South Dakota. In his letter Mr. Seder said that all of a sudden the birds had died by the thousands in the town of Huron. The affair caused much comment, and no one at Huron was able to name the bird concerned. The tragedy may have been the result of a storm.

Lark Sparrow

(*Chondestes grammacus grammacus*)

Several records for the lark sparrow have been obtained in recent years, and in 1921 Professor Guthrie found a nest with eggs in it near the college cemetery. Records as follows: 6, May 13, 1917; 3, April 25, 1919. The lark sparrow is one of the most characteristically marked of all sparrows. The white and chestnut pattern of the head and the white-tipped tail taken together at once distinguish it from others. It is a splendid singer.

Harris's Sparrow

(*Zonotrichia querula*)

Both Professor Guthrie and Professor Scullen have observed this sparrow at Ames, Professor Guthrie stating that he has seen it for three different springs. The writer has observed this sparrow but once at Ames. Two individuals were observed in a woods pasture north of town on May 6, 1920.

White-crowned Sparrow

(*Zonotrichia leucophrys leucophrys*)

First seen on May 7, 1919, when two individuals came up under a window of my home. The next year two were seen on May 29 in the woods north of Ames.

Swamp Sparrow

(*Melospiza georgiana*)

One individual observed April 26, 1919, under the willows just north of the president's house on the campus. Other records for the swamp sparrow have been made by other persons at Ames. It is known only as a rather rare transient visitor.

Cardinal

(*Cardinalis cardinalis cardinalis*)

The cardinal has now become firmly established at Ames, although formerly it probably was wanting there. The number of individuals is very small, probably never exceeding a dozen in a single season. But the species is always represented in the Ames region. Records as follows: 2, May 6, 1917; 1 (heard), February 24, 1918; 1 (heard), March 24, 1918; 1, April 18, 1918; 1, February 11, 1919 (B. R. E.); 1 (male), March 9, 1919; 2 (a pair), March 16, 1919; 5, April 20, 1919; 2 (a pair), May 2, 1919; 1, December 28, 1919; 1, May 8, 1920.

The cardinal has never become the tame bird at Ames that it is in much of its more permanent range. In the southeastern part of the country, where the bird is very abundant, individuals will come to the front porches and are frequently found at feeding stations.

Scarlet Tanager

(*Piranga erythromelas*)

The writer first observed the scarlet tanager at Ames on May 17, 1919, when a singing male was located in the top of a neighbor's tree. The next, and only other record was obtained May 16, 1920, when a male was observed in tree tops by the bird class of the college and the writer along the east bank of Squaw creek about a mile north of the college.

Cliff Swallow

(*Petrochelidon lunifrons lunifrons*)

Rare at Ames. One seen April 28, 1918, skimming over the college lake. One seen May 5 of the same year. This brightly marked swallow is easily recognized, if with the fieldglasses it can be followed successfully in its flight.

Bohemian Waxwing
(*Bombycilla garrula*)

Records of the occurrence of this waxwing in numbers at Ames during the months of January and February, 1920, were sent to Bird Lore and were published in the March-April number (page 99). These birds were first observed January 20, feeding in a thorn apple tree a few rods from my home and just outside the western city limits. I counted thirty-seven individuals in the flock this day. The next day the entire flock moved to a wild crab-apple tree less than a block away where they continued to feed for several days, being reported every day from January 28 to February 4. This crab-apple tree was loaded with frozen fruit which when eaten tasted quite tart and was observed to be very mealy.

At times practically the whole flock of waxwings would be in the crab-apple tree and feeding; at other times only a part of the flock would be feeding, while the remainder perched on nearby trees. In their feeding operations the birds worked from the top of the tree downward, and by January 24, all of the crab-apples on the upper part of the tree were gone, having been either eaten or detached and allowed to drop to the ground. As soon as the supply of the fruits on the tree became greatly reduced the birds began to feed on the fallen ones. Eventually the tree was stripped, and not only this but the hungry birds had picked up all the exposed fruits on the snow.

Some of the waxwings were unusually and almost unbelievably tame. They could be approached and almost touched by the hand before flying. This lack of fear of man has been noted by several observers. Could it not be explained by the fact that the birds are reared in the far north, in regions where man is almost if not entirely unknown, hence they have not learned to fear him? And further, their southern sojourn, being very unusual and of short duration has not exposed them sufficiently to man's deprivations to teach them wariness. A third factor, that of extreme hunger, also may have been a contributing one; fear under such conditions being counteracted by the craving of food.

Since leaving Ames the waxwings have been reported by others. Professor Guthrie reported one on January 31, 1922. He stated that it was seen for two or three days in the same vicinity and was feeding on rose hips. On February 24, 1922, a flock of twenty to twenty-five were observed, and the next day Professor Cuning-

ham reported a flock of perhaps one hundred feeding on wild apples. A boy is stated to have picked up one of these individuals while it was feeding.

Migrant Shrike

(*Lanius ludovicianus migrans*)

Two were seen July 15, 1917, about two miles north of town. One was seen May 15, 1919, along the street car tracks west of the Chemistry Building. Other records; 1, May 16, 1920; 1, May 22, 1920; 2, May 29, 1920; shrikes nesting, 1920 (J. E. G.).

The migrant shrike was most certainly a rare bird at Ames for a period of several years. However, the discovery of a nest in 1921, indicates that the species may be establishing itself again. That the migrant shrike was formerly a common bird on the campus at Ames is revealed by a contribution to the State Register by the late Professor F. E. L. Beal while he was connected with the college during the period 1879-1883. The following is a quotation from that article which is entitled "The Shrike or Butcher Bird," "Several pairs of these birds nest every year on the ground of the Agricultural College, and this is the only place where we have ever found their nests; nor have we ever seen the birds themselves during the summer in any other place. It is probable that they are attracted to this locality by the abundance of evergreens, for with a single exception, the nests have been built in those trees."

The reasons for the change in the abundance of this bird since the days of Beal are a little hard to surmise. Shelter, food and protection conditions at Ames appear to have been improved for the bird, yet until within the last two years it apparently was entirely wanting from its former haunts.

Audubon's Warbler

(*Dendroica auduboni auduboni*)

A single questionable record for this western warbler was obtained May 30, 1917, by Mrs. Ewing and myself. My notes made at the time read: "The one individual of Audubon's warbler was seen very plainly for several minutes in shrubbery growing along the west bank of Squaw creek. The heavy white band on each wing was especially conspicuous. We noticed the black lower throat, the yellow on the throat proper and at sides of body. We did not see the small yellow patch on top of the head, but did not get a view of bird from above." Since these

notes were made I have been inclined to discredit the determination, since no subsequent records were obtained.

Chestnut-sided Warbler

(*Dendroica pennsylvanica*)

The chestnut-sided warbler is seldom seen at Ames. Two records for it were obtained; 1, May 27, 1917, and 1, June 3, 1917. This warbler is said to be a common summer resident in southeastern Minnesota.

Bay-breasted Warbler

(*Dendroica castanea*)

A single record was obtained, three being seen May 27, 1917. This warbler is a common transient visitor only in certain favorably situated places in the northern states. In southeastern Minnesota it is uncommon. Speaking of this warbler Chapman says: "Although close observation will reveal the presence of Bay-breasts during both the spring and fall migrations, they are generally to be classed among the rarer warblers the mere sight of which is stimulating."

Mourning Warbler

(*Oporornis philadelphia*)

The mourning warbler is said by Chapman, "to be a more or less rare bird throughout its range," and according to Brewster there are definite records of but fifteen individuals at Cambridge — this statement being made a number of years ago. It is one of the very latest of our birds to arrive in the spring. The scarcity of records may be in part due to this fact, many observers frequently stopping their migration records before the species arrives. On May 22, 1920, I observed four males in the woods north of town. They were studied at a range of only twenty to thirty feet. The day was "partly cloudy" and there was a strong southwest wind.

Winter Wren

(*Nannus hiemalis hiemalis*)

Some might consider the winter wren a common bird at Ames. Six records are here given for it; 1, April 14, 1915 (B. R. E.); 1, April 15, 1917; 1, April 22, 1917 (B. R. E.); 1, April 21, 1918; 2, March 28, 1919; 2, March 28, 1920 (B. R. E.).

Robin (Albino Specimen)

(*Planesticus migratorius migratorius*)

During the summer of 1916 and 1917 an albino robin nested on the south side of the campus. Several persons reported it to me. Finally on May 27, 1917, I observed this individual and to good advantage. The following are the notes I made at the time: "We obtained several excellent views of it. This individual was not pure white at all, in fact the only white patch in the plumage was one on the rump and base of tail which extended up the back about half way to the neck. The tail had a few white feathers in the middle, and the rest of the bird was mottled by the presence of white feathers, but the natural colors usually predominated."

The fact that the same individual was seen in the same place the year before (1916) is of significance in proving that, in this case at least, a bird may return to the same identical spot to nest from year to year.

SPECIES DOUBTFULLY ACCREDITED TO THE AMES REGION

Rusty Blackbird

(*Euphagus carolinus*)

Reliable records of the occurrence of the rusty blackbird at Ames must exist since the species has been so frequently reported there by amateurs. Such records, however, are not at hand. Most of the records by amateurs are to be questioned as they too frequently refer undoubtedly to either the cow bird or the female redwing. Professor Guthrie states of the rusty blackbird, "I do not believe I have ever seen one alive" In eastern Iowa the species is said to be fairly common.

Blue Grosbeak

(*Guiraca caerulea caerulea*)

On May 15, 1919, while I was taking my class of bird students on a trip, a bird, thought to be the blue grosbeak, was observed in the woods north of town. Subsequent observation of this individual proved it to be a somewhat "off color" specimen of the indigo bunting. A record of this species occurring at Ames was published in Bird Lore. It probably refers to the individual observed May 15, 1919.

Mockingbird

(*Mimus polyglottos polyglottos*)

The writer has never observed the mockingbird at Ames and is inclined to doubt its occurrence there. However, Professor Guthrie takes a different view. He writes: "I believe we have an undoubtedly accurate record of a mockingbird west of campus. Mrs. Battell observer. It fed at her station under observation several days."

Red-breasted Nuthatch.

(*Sitta canadensis*)

A very careful study of the nuthatches at Ames for a period of four years failed to reveal a single good record for the red-breast. Nuthatches were abundant at the feeding station maintained about a rod in front of the dining-room window of the writer's home at the corporation limits of west Ames. All of these and all others observed at Ames were *S. carolinensis*. Professor Scullen, shortly before he left Ames, told the writer that he had never obtained a good record for the red-breasted nuthatch here." Professor Guthrie writes, "I have never yet seen a red-breasted nuthatch here."

Tufted Titmouse

(*Baeolophus bicolor*)

I have never seen a tufted titmouse in the vicinity of Ames and feel sure that in past years it was either absent from that region or occurred there only as a straggler. Professor Guthrie informs me that it is now reported as occurring there, and that he saw small flocks of them in the spring of 1921. This is most welcome news, and gives evidence again of positive results following a campaign of bird protection. Formerly the titmouse was absent from most of eastern Iowa. Dr. Bartsch of the United States National Museum informs me that for many years the titmouse did not occur at Iowa City, but at present occurs there in some numbers.

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