

NORTHERN (BULLOCK'S) ORIOLE AT SASKATOON

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On June 5, 1993, I made one of my periodic trips to a marsh located east of the Saskatoon airport and Idylwyld Drive, and immediately south of 71st Street. It is part of a chain of marshes that have gradually disappeared as "progress" demanded more land for commercial development.

I arrived at the southern end of the marsh at 2:15 p.m. It was a sunny day, the temperature approximately 20°C, and windy. This area has long grass, small trees and shrubs and willow clumps. It is quite lush and has lots of natural food for songbirds. The marsh itself supports a large number of songbirds, coots, ducks, geese and waders.

As I began my walk to the marsh I heard an unfamiliar call. I searched the surrounding bushes for several minutes with my binoculars. Finally, I saw a bright flash as a robin-sized bird flew from one low tree to another. As I watched, it appeared among the leaves, feeding quickly and moving about in quite an energetic fashion. It repeated its staccato call.

The single adult looked initially and superficially like the Baltimore version of the Northern Oriole. I realized after a few seconds that it was different. It was paler than the Baltimores I have frequently seen and it seemed slimmer. Most importantly it

did not have a black hood. It did have black head markings and the same general body pattern. I was quite surprised and turned to my National Geographic bird guide to check. At that instant the bird flew off and began feeding in another tall shrub further away. I was able to follow this feeding activity for three or four minutes and the most prominent feature of the bird at that distance, other than its bright colour, was a white wing patch which showed several times as it seemed to fan or spread its wings while balancing on the thinner branches of the shrub. Its song continued during all of the feeding activity and was quite unlike the melodic song of the Baltimore. I concluded I had seen a male adult Bullock's Oriole.

The foregoing account of my observations of a Bullock's Oriole prompts me to add these comments. The reader should understand that the views expressed here are of an untrained amateur and are based largely on my years of experience as such. It strikes me as anomalous that the "professional" would lump together the Baltimore and Bullock's Orioles under the general category of Northern Oriole. The species seemed to me quite distinctive both as to range and physical appearance. However, if they are to be joined, why then do we not add to the same category the Hooded Oriole, which is remarkably similar?

No doubt questions of this sort will be debated for a long time. I have never been convinced, moreover, that it was appropriate to lump together the Audubon and Myrtle Warblers under the general category of Yellow-rumped Warbler. Again, there are significant distinctions. If one allows for this kind of egalitarian treatment why not then join together the Blackpoll and Black-and-White Warblers, which are very similar in appearance, and both of which have similar ranges, in part?

I can appreciate the reasons for bringing together the Slate-colored and Oregon Juncos under the general category of the Dark-Eyed Junco. Undoubtedly the colour variations observed in what was first perceived to be two separate spe-

cies are just that, colour variations. All of which brings me back to a comment about the tendency to merge species on the basis of what may be incomplete information. Were it not for the observations of naturalists who recorded the songs of a number of Empidonax flycatchers, undoubtedly some of these would have been merged into some kind of common species. I am thinking particularly of the Alder, Least and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers.

Ed. note: More and more, criteria other than plumage, e.g., DNA, contribute to our knowledge of bird relationships. Apparently the reason for combining the orioles, warblers and juncos mentioned in the article is that they interbreed where their ranges overlap.



The development of new techniques for examining the genetic makeup of birds, e.g., comparison of mitochondrial DNA, has invigorated the debate about species and subspecies. In examining a series of species, scientists found that Pacific Northwest yellowthroats differed from yellowthroats in the eastern United States as much as some pairs of closely related species. It seems possible that birders may someday be faced with the problem of sorting out the yellowthroats, a task that promises to be every bit as exacting as identifying the Empidonax flycatcher. *Bird Watcher's Digest newsletter, the Skimmer (Feb/93).*