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A REVIEW OF THE STATUS OF *Limnodromus griseus*, THE SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER, IN NEBRASKA

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INTRODUCTION

The two North American dowitchers are notoriously difficult to distinguish from each other. This is not only true of field observations, but there are several instances where a specimen identified as one species was found to be the other upon review. *Limnodromus scolopaceus*, the Long-billed Dowitcher, has always been considered the common dowitcher in Nebraska, while *Limnodromus griseus*, the Short-billed Dowitcher, is less common. Confusion about identification and the lack of consistent, well-documented records have caused the status of *L. griseus* in Nebraska to be a matter of speculation.

Taxonomy of dowitchers was for some time confused. Studies of speciation by Rowan (1932) and Pitelka (1950) clarified the status of *L. scolopaceus* and *L. griseus* as distinct species. Three subspecies of *L. griseus* are recognized. *L.g. griseus* breeds in eastern Canada, and migrates and winters along the Atlantic Coast. *L.g. caurinus* breeds in Alaska, and migrates and winters along the Pacific Coast. *L.g. hendersoni* breeds in central Canada and migrates through the interior, east of the Rockies to the Atlantic Coast. This is the subspecies expected in Nebraska; it was known as the "Alberta Dowitcher" by early ornithologists.

REVIEW OF NEBRASKA RECORDS OF *L. griseus*

The first and only previous critical analysis of Nebraska dowitchers was by Myron Swenk (1940), who concluded that *L. scolopaceus* was common throughout the state, and presented six specimens presumed to be *L. griseus*; these are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Specimens of *L. griseus* (Swenk 1940).

Date	County	Number	Age & Sex	Collector
30 April 1933	Lancaster	two	adult males	G.E. Hudson
4 May 1896	Lancaster	one	adult male	unknown
16 May 1910	Lancaster	one	adult male	G.M. Pinneo
10 August 1918	Adams	two	adult male & female	A.M. Brookings
28 August 1896	Lancaster	one	adult male	August Eiche
7 September 1932	Lancaster	one	adult male	G.E. Hudson

Based on these six specimens, Swenk rather generously classified *L. griseus* as a "common migrant in eastern Nebraska."

I attempted to locate and review the specimens listed in Table 1. The female and male taken in Adams County on 10 August 1918 were misidentified. The length of the male's culmen is 62.5 millimeters (mm), and the female's is 67 mm. The male's culmen is longer than the longest length of *L.g. hendersoni* males and the female's culmen length is at the extreme of *L.g. hendersoni*, according to data in Pitelka (1950). It appears that the specimens, not examined first-hand by Swenk, were identified on the basis of plumage, but adults of *L. scolopaceus* can appear identical to *L.g. hendersoni* in August, due to wear and fading of plumage (Newlon and Kent 1980; pers. obs.). One of the pair, housed at the Hastings Museum, was eventually correctly labeled as "Long-billed Dowitcher/*Limnodromus*

scolopaceus." The other was given to the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge (Mary Lou Jurgena, Accessions Registrar, pers. comm.).

The specimen collected on 7 September 1932 was identified as an adult "Eastern Dowitcher," *L.g. griseus*, solely because it was "identical in every way with the specimens in corresponding plumage from the South Carolina Coast" (Swenk 1940). As such, it would be the sole Nebraska record of *L.g. griseus*. However, both *L.g. griseus* and *L.g. hendersoni* migrate to and winter along the southern Atlantic Coast (Jehl 1963). Furthermore, the specimen is clearly a juvenile, and while these are difficult to assign to subspecies, there is no reason to suspect that this bird is not *L.g. hendersoni*, the only subspecies likely in Nebraska. The golden fringing of the upperparts is very broad, typical of juvenile *L.g. hendersoni* (Paulson 1993).

The two adult males taken on 30 April 1933 in Lancaster County could not be located. Without specimens, the records are considered hypothetical. No measurements or other diagnostic information were provided by Swenk. The two males were simply described as "distinctly Alberta Dowitchers." A specimen in the University of Nebraska State Museum labelled 4-5-1896 is presumed to be the 4 May 1896 specimen. The culmen and wing measurements, and plumage characters are in support of this presumption. The remaining two specimens, 28 August 1896 and 16 May 1910, were reviewed and the author concurs with their identification.

From 1940 up to 1985 there were no additional specimens collected or any documented published accounts. Beginning in 1985 (NBR 55:79-85) and through 1993, the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union Records Committee reviewed three reports, all accepted. These are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Records reviewed and accepted by the NOU Records Committee

Date	County	Class Voted
13 May 1988	Boone	Class III
16 May 1991	Holt	Class I-P
21 July 1987	Boone	Class III

The 13 May 1988 and 16 May 1991 records listed in Table 2 were reviewed and the author considers them correctly identified. The 21 July 1987 record is not unimpeachable, however. A photograph and description were submitted, but the photograph alone was considered not diagnostic (NBR 58:90-97), and the record was assigned to Class III, a record based on acceptable written documentation. Nevertheless, no diagnostic feature such as call or the markings on the side of the breast at the bend of the wing, is described. While the date of occurrence, 21 July, is suggestive of the earlier migrating *L. griseus*, individuals of *L. scolopaceus* can occur at this time on the central Great Plains. An excellent illustration of this situation is a specimen taken in Colorado on 16 July 1938 and identified as *L. griseus*; on later examination the specimen was found to be *L. scolopaceus* (Andrews and Righter 1992). Although the 21 July 1987 Nebraska report may be *L. griseus*, the lack of conclusive written details leads me to consider the record hypothetical.

There are several additional credible records that have been either published, personally communicated to me, or are my personal observations. Records shown in Table 3 were conclusively identified by the hearing of diagnostic call notes or, if the birds were juveniles, the viewing of the diagnostic tertial pattern. Many of the latest records are mine, and I made a conscious effort to find the species. While there are certainly more records involving

L. griseus, all published reports not involving diagnostic information have been dismissed.

Table 3. Additional records of *L. griseus*

Date	County	Number and Age	Observer(s)	Source
20 April 1996	Knox	2 Adults	Mark Brogie	Pers. comm.
11 May 1996	Keith	4 Adults	Joel & Gerald Jorgensen	Pers. obs.
14 May 1985	Sarpy	10 Adults	R. Wright & S. Zende	NBR 53:41-42
15 May 1996	Douglas	1 Adult	Joel Jorgensen	Pers. obs.
18 May 1996	Clay	4 Adults	W. Ross Silcock	Pers. comm.
5 Aug. 1995	Phelps	40-45 Adults	W.R. Silcock & S.J. Dinsmore	NBR 62:134
7 Aug. 1994	Keith	47 Adults	W.R. Silcock & S.J. Dinsmore	NBR 63:103
16 Aug. 1988	Clay or Hamilton	1 (age ?)	Paul Bedell	NBR 56:16, 18-19
19-26 Aug. 1995	Fillmore	6 Juveniles	Joel Jorgensen	Pers. obs.
20 Aug. 1995	Clay	2 Juveniles	Joel Jorgensen	Pers. obs.
24 Aug. 1996	Platte	3 Juveniles	Joel Jorgensen	Pers. obs.
25 Aug.-10 Sept. 1996	Colfax	1-2 Juveniles	Joel Jorgensen	Pers. obs.
26 Aug. 1995	York	1 Juvenile	Joel Jorgensen	Pers. obs.
2 Sept. 1996	Hamilton	1 Juvenile	Joel Jorgensen	Pers. obs.
8 Sept. 1996	Cass	3 Juveniles	Loren & Babs Padelford	Pers. comm.
10 Sept. 1995	York	1 Juvenile	Joel Jorgensen	Pers. obs.

SUMMARY OF NEBRASKA RECORDS

Spring: Nine documented records. *L. griseus* appears to be found primarily during mid-May in Nebraska. Excluding the 20 April record, records are 4, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 16, 18 May. Out of the nine spring records, seven are from the eastern third of the state.

Fall: Thirteen documented records. There are only three records of adults, two of which were large flocks during the first week of August. The other, a specimen, was collected on 28 August. Nine records, totalling 21 individuals, are of juveniles during the period of 19 August - 10 September. The 16 August 1988 record is probably a juvenile as well.

DISCUSSION

The primary migration pathway of *L. griseus* has generally been considered to pass through the Mississippi River Valley and across the Great Lakes Region (Newlon and Kent 1980), a route that is essentially north and east of Nebraska. In Iowa, the species is considered common (Dinsmore et al. 1984), and in Missouri it is listed as an uncommon to locally common migrant (Robbins and Easterla 1992). It is a "probable fairly common migrant with most records E [east]" in South Dakota (SDOU 1991), although apparently

undocumented sight records were used in this determination.

Away from the main migration pathway, *L. griseus* is much less common. Thompson and Ely (1989) consider it only a rare migrant in Kansas, with most records in the central area. Up to 1960, there were only two specimen records from Oklahoma (Sutton 1960). In Colorado, it is considered accidental in spring and very rare in fall (Andrews and Righter 1992). In Wyoming, it is considered rare (Scott 1993).

In spring, *L. griseus* migrates later than *L. scolopaceus*. Based on compiled data from the Cooperative Field Reports in the Nebraska Bird Review, *L. scolopaceus* arrives about a month earlier than *L. griseus*, in late March or very early April, and peak migration occurs about the first of May. April records anywhere in the upper midwest are unusual. In Missouri, where *L. griseus* migrates regularly, it appears at the beginning of May, with the earliest date 27 April, and numbers peak in mid-May (Robbins and Easterla 1992). The earliest record for Iowa is 26 April 1985 (Thomas H. Kent fide W. Ross Silcock, pers. comm.).

Young (1995) has reviewed Kansas specimens and found that these were taken during the period of 13-31 May. The two Oklahoma specimens are for 7 and 18 May (Sutton 1960). As mentioned above, eight of the nine spring records for Nebraska are during the period 4-18 May, five of which fall during the four-day period 13-16 May. The dates from Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska, where *L. griseus* appears to be rare, are essentially during the peak migration period.

Fall migration has been well studied. Jehl (1963) found that *L. griseus* has a highly structured, trimodal fall migration. Around 10 July, large numbers arrive almost simultaneously on the Atlantic Coast. This first peak is composed primarily of post-breeding females. The next influx occurs in late July or early August, and consists of adult males. The final peak of juveniles occurs in mid-August. *L. scolopaceus* adults arrive somewhat later in August and juveniles usually do not appear until the end of September or October.

What is notable about the Nebraska fall records is the absence of any in July. There are two records during the first week of August, both of which were large flocks of adults. Data in Jehl (1963) suggest that these flocks may consist of males, which is interesting and possibly noteworthy, since all Nebraska specimens and most Kansas specimens, including those taken in both spring and fall, are males (Gene Young, pers. comm.). Jehl (1963) suggests that females may make a non-stop flight to the Atlantic Coast, thereby avoiding the interior and Nebraska. Most fall records are juveniles; in fact, there are just as many fall records of juveniles as there are spring records, and three times as many records of juveniles as of adults in fall. All juvenile records neatly fall in the period of 19 August-10 September. Most groups of juveniles have been found only during 19-26 August, possibly indicating the peak movement.

The 28 August 1896 Lancaster record is unusual because it is very late for an adult. Not only is the occurrence late but the bird is in alternate plumage and shows no signs of molting to basic plumage. Most adults of *L. griseus* have molted and are in basic plumage by 15 August (Jehl 1963). The specimen is very old, and the possibility exists that the bird was collected earlier in the month, but the date on the label is inaccurate.

CONCLUSIONS

With the data accumulated and the observations made up to this point, I would consider *L. griseus* a rare (1-6 individuals per

season for the region) spring and fall migrant in the eastern half of Nebraska, becoming less common in the west. Juveniles during the latter half of August are most common. Additional reliable records of *L. griseus* are needed before its true status in Nebraska is known. Migration of *L. griseus* through the Great Plains is interesting, baffling, and not well-defined, primarily due to confusion with the common dowitcher species, *L. scolopaceus*. Observers who find and identify *L. griseus* in the field should send adequate documentation to the NOU Records Committee. At least, observers should submit diagnostic details, such as the hearing of call notes, to the compiler of the Seasonal Field Reports. Documentation is always needed and should always be provided for large flocks and birds found at unexpected times (adults in April and after early August, and any individual after mid-September). Hopefully, after the accumulation of many credible records, questions about occurrence can be answered with some degree of confidence.

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