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RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD MOVEMENTS ON LAKE ERIE ISLANDS

Mildred Miskimen
Put-in-Bay, Ohio

Although I have lived on South Bass Island for little more than three years and had been coming for summers for six or eight years before that, I am only beginning to get a little bit of understanding of what is going on in the blackbird realm. What I have to say today doesn't deal with very many conclusions, but it should be considered a "progress report."

I have made most of my observations in the morning, and in the late afternoon or evening when the blackbirds are most active. In the morning the birds usually leave the roost around sunrise, and I followed them around for an hour or two, or three, depending on the circumstances, as long as they are active. I then worked with them again in the evening, going out about the time they began their evening feeding and their pre-roosting maneuvers, staying until they roosted about sunset.

I am particularly interested in their whole life history (the blackbirds). I feel that when we have a species that is important economically, we want to control the negative factors without impairing the positive factors that this species involves. We do not want to make the mistake that the people in the West did with exterminating the wolves and the coyotes and the wildcats, mountain lions, and so on. We want to be temperate with our control of these animals and for that reason I feel that it is important for us to know all that we can about the total life history of this particular species of blackbird.

What I am going to say this afternoon is based entirely on field observations. As I said, this is a progress report. Maybe in another five or ten years I shall have enough data so that I can come back and show you something more detailed.

The area with which we are dealing is the archipelago that runs across between Ottawa county, Ohio, and Ontario, Canada. I have not done any work on Point Pelee, but I have worked on Pelee Island, on all of the U.S. islands, and along the North shore around Sandusky bay. What I am considering this afternoon, however, is the area involving the Bass Islands; South, Middle, and North; and also Kelly's Island, Pelee Island, and some of the small islands in between.

This whole area seems to be a unit. In some ways it is like a laboratory situation because the area is not completely isolated from the birds on the mainland either way, but there is a degree of isolation. We look at the birds on South Bass Island, and especially during the breeding season, we are dealing with an almost discrete population, not completely so, as the birds do go back and forth to the other islands. But to a large extent, the ones on South Bass Island form a population that we can study and, hopefully, in the course of a few years, we can find out more detail that will have wider application.

There is no large cattail marsh on any of the Lake Erie islands at present. Probably, there never were any very extensive cattail marshes, but there are a few cattail patches here and there on some of the islands. Due to the fact that the islands are rocky and that there is no extensive level ground, I doubt that there was ever any marsh that was more than five acres in extent.

The islands are probably more important blackbird breeding grounds now than they were two hundred years ago, when the islands were mostly covered with tall trees. The breeding grounds now on the islands--this applies to the islands in general--are in old fields, old vineyards, thickets that have grown up in what were formerly cultivated areas, and a few grassy areas. I have not attempted any detailed census on the islands as far as breeding populations are concerned, but from casual observation, I am sure that thousands upon thousands of blackbirds hatch on South Bass every year. There are meadows; there are the old thickets and places where they breed in great numbers. So it appears that all the islands of this area are important breeding grounds for blackbirds.

The islands are important feeding grounds through the summer, the breeding birds live here. There are not any corn fields worth mentioning. There are a few people who have a few rows of sweet corn in their gardens, but a good many of them say, "Oh, we don't grow sweet corn any more because the blackbirds always take it," so there is not even a normal amount of garden sweetcorn. I have seen a few fields of corn on Pelee Island and on Kelly's Island which are larger than South Bass, but these are not very extensive and I have no particular information about the extent of the blackbird damage there.

Blackbirds do not do very much damage to the vineyards, although people who are raising grapes say that they do, but this is what I have seen: When a blackbird goes into a vineyard it will take a few grapes from the top-most branch of the topmost vines in the row, and not bother the ones that are down under. And when he takes one or two grapes out of a bunch, that doesn't spoil the whole bunch. It is not comparable to the destruction that is done to corn. But of course, the robins, the cedar wax-wings, and the starlings do much more damage to the grapes than the blackbirds do. Blackbird damage is really negligible, though they are often blamed.

Most of the feeding of the blackbirds and their young, as far as I have been able to tell, is done on the island which they occupy as a roost, but there is some going back and forth. In the mornings, during the summer, if I go to the south end of South Bass, I see birds flying across to Catawba. And if I am on the northern part of the island, I see them flying across toward Middle Bass Island. In the evenings, if I go to these same areas, I see birds coming to South Bass from different directions.

There is a big roost on South Bass that seems to be the attraction for these birds that come from the other islands. The roost is in cedar trees along the road with deciduous trees around the periphery and some small bush area as well. I have gone to North Bass and stood on the south end and I have seen flocks of redwings gather in the tall trees there. After several hundred have accumulated, they go spiraling upward in a characteristic way. If I have my binoculars, I can see them fly straight across and when they get over the roost on South Bass, they zoom down into it. They do this in the summer time; this was not when there were big migration movements.

One of the things I am trying to find out is the extent to which they use this roost on South Bass as a central point, and to what extent they go to the other islands to feed during the day and come back at night. I am convinced that some of them do that. I do not know if it is an important or regular thing: I have not enough data to be sure, but that is one of the things that I am studying.

There is quite a large population of non-breeding second-year birds that hang around. I suspect that they are the ones that do most of this island-hopping, although, I can't be sure of that. I have the impression that the breeding adults and the fledglings may stay closer home. The non-breeding birds mostly second year, perhaps make up the bulk of the flocks that go on these longer feeding flights. To us it looks a little impractical for them to go from one island to another, but it seems to me that going from one island to another—here, where it is only two or three miles across, is perhaps no more important to a red-wing than flying from one corn field to another.

I have the impression that most of the birds that cross the lake in migration cross over these islands. There is a big roost at Lorraine, Ohio, one of the biggest roosts I have ever seen. One of my former graduate students has watched that roost for several seasons. He says that he has never seen the birds fly across the open lake and come down at Lorraine, but rather that they fly along the shore and down the river valleys into that roost. In March when the blackbirds first come in I feel that that cedar roost is an important stopping place. It is dense, it gives them good cover against the cold wind and wet weather that prevails at the time. And as we know, blackbirds are very sensitive to cold wind, especially when their feathers are wet. Later in the season when there are greater numbers of birds coming through, the deciduous trees have leafed out and they form greater shelter for them.

I think there are several reasons why these islands are important in migration. The matter of visibility is important, they hesitate to start out over open water when they cannot see all the way, we can see that hesitation. The islands may serve also as buffers against the wind. In very windy weather we see the fall and spring migrants flying close to the water going across; in calmer weather they make higher flights. There are probably convection currents, which may be important in keeping them here and inducing them to keep this particular pattern of movement.

What I hope to find out in the next few years is something about the behavior of the flocks, their stability, and to what extent the big flocks are made up of the same individuals over a season, or over the years. I should like to know something of the change in behavior with changes in numbers. How does the number of birds present affect the total behavior of the flock? Does a flock of one hundred behave differently from a flock of ten thousand, for example. And I want to know more about the cedar roost and its role. How much does it influence the movement of the birds back and forth across these islands? I think all these things are influencing their movement, but I would like to know which are the most important.

DISCUSSION:

ROBERT SCHWAB: I don't have a question, but I do have a comment. It seems to me that you have an ideal situation on the islands to study age-related strategies on feeding and I certainly hope you are able to differentiate on an age basis your population and get this information.

MILDRED MISKIMEN: Yes, we have some data on that. Not a great deal.

JOEL KERLAN: I was wondering if there was anything special about the cedar roost. I am questioning in a more general sense, why do birds pick certain landmarks to roost in. Do you have any feelings about that?

MILDRED MISKIMEN: Well, I would like to know that, too. That is one of the things I have to find out. At present, my hypothesis is that it is a matter of shelter during the early part of March when they come in. And I think perhaps they become habituated to that particular location. Perhaps the birds that have found it favorable in the spring as they go northward, will come back to the same place in the fall as they go southward when the shelter, the protection, is not such an important factor. That is just my hypothesis, I'm trying to get some more information on this problem.