

First documented record of Red-breasted Blackbird *Sturnella militaris* in Nicaragua

Wayne J. Arendt and Marvin A. Tórrez

Received 4 October 2008; final revision accepted 16 April 2009
Cotinga 31 (2009): 119–120

Reportamos los primeros avistamientos documentados de *Sturnella militaris* para Nicaragua. Se observó un mínimo de cinco individuos en pastos húmedos, en el camino que une las comunidades de Laguna de Perlas y Awas en la vertiente Caribe de Nicaragua. Los avistamientos fueron de un macho solitario y un grupo familiar, el segundo de cual sugiere que por lo menos la especie haya alcanzado la residencia temporánea en el país. Es probable que corredores antropogénicos estén facilitando la expansión de la especie tanto en longitud y altitud como en latitud.

Red-breasted Blackbird *Sturnella militaris* is extensively distributed through northern South America, Panama, Costa Rica and Trinidad⁶. Generally, it is considered 'common' throughout its range and, thus, is of Least Concern in terms of conservation and management needs³. The species is associated with open country, including moist grasslands and open agricultural areas, e.g., rice, row crops, and monocultures¹, facilitating latitudinal, longitudinal¹ and altitudinal expansion⁷.

On 6 and 8 September 2008, we observed at least five Red-breasted Blackbirds in flooded savanna (12°20'N 86°40'W; 2 m) along the main road between Pearl Lagoon and Awas, in the Atlantic Autonomous Region (South) of Nicaragua's Caribbean coast (Figs. 1–2). Grasses <1 m tall dominated the savanna. White mangrove *Leguncularia racemosa* <4 m tall, and papta palms *Acoelorrhaphe wrightii* <2 m high, in small clumps, were sparsely scattered throughout the savanna. On 6 September we observed a singing male at 10h00, perched c.1.5 m above ground in a white mangrove c.10 m from the road. It sang and preened for c.15 minutes before dropping out of sight in dense grass. At 17h00 we observed a male and a female flying north-east. As they did so, we saw a lone male more than 200 m from the singing male. On 8 September at 06h00 we observed a male perched in white mangrove c.1 m above ground. A female flew up from the grass near the same mangrove and perched nearby. Six minutes later a second male flew up from the grass and perched in a nearby white mangrove.

Using binoculars and a telescope we compared the plumages of both males. The supercilium of the first male was distinct, whereas that of the second was barely evident. Both males had overall black upperparts, but the fringes of the first male's scapulars, secondary-coverts, secondaries and tertials were brighter buff than those of the second male. Based on size and plumage descriptions^{5,8–10} as evidenced in the photographs and video we acquired, we assume that the first male was a young bird.

While we were comparing the males, a second female-plumaged blackbird flew up and perched near the second male. It had a stubby tail and dishevelled plumage, and we assume that it was recently fledged. Based on differences in size and plumage in these four birds, and because the two adults 'tolerated' the presence of the other birds, we conclude that a family group was involved.



Figure 1. Map of Nicaragua depicting the location of our Red-breasted Blackbird *Sturnella militaris* records.



Figure 2. Red-breasted Blackbird *Sturnella militaris* savanna habitat dominated by grasses, white mangrove *Leguncularia racemosa* and papta palms *Acoelorrhaphe wrightii* (Wayne J. Arendt).

Although we visited other areas of the same savanna within a radius of 0.5 km, and subsequently visited another savanna >1 km away, we did not find additional Red-breasted Blackbirds.

Red-breasted Blackbird was first documented in Central America on 3 May 1889 in central Panama's Coclé province (US National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC, specimen no. 150842). In Costa Rica, the species was first documented on 17 May 1970, when a small breeding colony was discovered at a large pasture c.2 km west of Sierpe, a small town c.30 km from the Pacific Ocean along the río Sierpe⁸. Almost 30 years later (on 11 October 1998), the species was reported on Costa Rica's Atlantic slope, when two males were seen between Caño Blanco and El Carmen de Siquirres. On 18 October 1998 >40 birds, including adult males, females and immatures, were observed foraging in the same general area². More recently (on 21 April 2002), the species was seen in wet pastures at six different locations along the road to La Aldea, just south and east of the confluence of the ríos Sarapiquí and San Juan, c.7 km south of the Nicaraguan border⁴ and c.200 km south of our sightings.

Ours is the first published record with photographs (and video available on request) for Nicaragua, and constitutes a northern extension of the species' previously documented range. Our observations of at least one family group, including recently fledged young, suggest the establishment of at least temporary permanent residency by *S. militaris* in Nicaragua. Benefiting from 'open habitats' created by forest clearance and ranching, Red-breasted Blackbird should continue to extend its range north and west via anthropogenic corridors.

Acknowledgements

We thank Bienvenida & Jerry Bauer for assistance in the field, and Jerry for furnishing many photographs and video footage. We also thank Oliver Komar and Knut Eisermann for their thorough reviews, and Guy Kirwan for his insightful advice, all of which greatly improved our submission. The US Forest Service, Institute of Tropical Forestry and US Agency for International Development (PASA no. 524-P-00-00-07-00007-00) provided financial and logistical support.

References

1. American Ornithologists' Union (1998) *The American Ornithologists' Union check-list of North American birds*. Seventh edn. Washington DC: American Ornithologists' Union.
2. Araya V., H. (1999) *Sturnella militaris* en el Atlántico Norte. *Zeledonia* 3(1). [http://zeledonia.org/files/revista/zeledonia_1_a_7/boletin013a.html]
3. BirdLife International (2008) Species factsheet: *Sturnella militaris*. www.birdlife.org/datazone/species/index.html (accessed 11 September 2008).
4. Garrigues, R. (2002) Nicaraguan border crossing imminent. The Gone Birding Newsletter 3(3). [<http://www.angelfire.com/bc/gonebirding/news10.html>]
5. Hilty, S. L. & Brown, W. L. (1986) *A guide to the birds of Colombia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
6. Jaramillo, A. & Burke, P. (1999) *New World blackbirds*. London, UK: Christopher Helm.
7. Jones, H. L. & Komar, O. (2008) The fall migration, August through November 2007: Central America. *North Amer. Birds* 62: 163–170.
8. Kiff, L. F. (1975) Notes on southeastern Costa Rican birds. *Condor* 77: 101–103.
9. Ridgely, R. S. & Gwynne, J. A. (2005) *Guía de las aves de Panamá*. Panama City: Sociedad Audubon de Panamá y Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza.
10. Stiles, F. G. & Skutch, A. F. (1989) *A guide to the birds of Costa Rica*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Wayne J. Arendt

USDA Forest Service, International Institute of Tropical Forestry, Sabana Research Field Station, HC 2 Box 6205, Luquillo 00773, Puerto Rico. E-mail: waynearendt@mac.com.

Marvin A. Tórrez

Barrio La Fuente, Escuela Normal 4 cuerdas al Este, ½ cuadra al Sur, Managua, Nicaragua. E-mail: marvintorrez@me.com.