NOTES ON THE SUMMER BIRDS OF FAYETTE COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

by

Maurice G. Brooks

Fayette County, Pennsylvania, is located in the southwestern portion of that state, with Somerset County to the east and Greene County to the west. To the south, across the Mason and Dixon Line, lie the western portion of Preston County, both in West Virginia. Despite the fact that it includes territory of much ornithological interest, it has received but little attention from bird students. Thomas D. Burleigh (Cardinal: Vol. III, No. 4, July 1932. Pp. 73-83) has given us some fairly detailed notes on the breeding birds of the county, and these notes are in the nature of an addendum to his article.

Beginning on the west with the narrow flood plain of the Monongahela River, there is next a fairly uniform, but somewhat dissected, plateau. East of the county includes the first high ridge of the Allegheny mountains (Chestnut Ridge), which rises abruptly about three miles east of Uniontown; then comes an elevated plateau, and finally another mountain ridge (Laurel Hill), along the crest of which lies much of the county's eastern border. There is a range in elevation from approximately 800 feet to approximately 2300 feet.

From the standpoint of racial determination, this is a critical area for a number of species. In other papers I have pointed out the wholly unsatisfactory and unscientific nature of the assumption that breeding birds of certain species to the north of the Mason and Dixon Line are, per se, of the northern race, while those to the south are of a southern race; this in a territory where there are no natural topographical or biological breaks between Pennsylvania and West Virginia. This situation applies particularly in the cases of slate-colored and Carolina juncos, blue-headed and mountain vireos, and black-throated blue and Cairn's warblers. In each instance, the Pennsylvania birds have been referred to the first-named of the races, the West Virginia birds to the second-named. Actually of course there is no such hard-and-fast distinction to be found, typical examples of both races, along with many intermediates, being found in both states.
During the last fifteen years I have made some hundreds of visits to Fayette County, often accompanied by other bird students. Most of these trips have been to the extreme southern portions of the county, just across the West Virginia border, and it is to this region that most of the notes which follow apply. I have not attempted to repeat the species which Burleigh lists as breeding birds, unless there is additional information at hand.

Wood Duck, _Aix sponsa_. I have noted these birds in summer on a number of occasions, principally along the Youghiogheny River and some of its tributaries. It doubtless breeds in small numbers.

Turkey Vulture, _Cathartes aura septentrionalis_. Burleigh considers this bird rare in summer, but I have found it regularly along the mountain ridges, where it undoubtedly breeds. There are many suitable nesting sites on the cliffs which outcrop on Chestnut Ridge.

Sharp-shinned Hawk, _Accipiter striatus velox_. Burleigh gives no summer records for this little hawk, but I have found it sparingly but regularly, especially in the area around Wimp's Gap, a wind gap in Chestnut Ridge just east of Fairchance.

Red-tailed Hawk, _Buteo jamaicensis borealis_. I found a nest in June, 1937, just north of Cheat River, near Point Marion. There are other summer records.

Red-shouldered Hawk, _Buteo lineatus_. I have seen this species in summer along both Chestnut and Laurel Ridges, but have found no nests.

Marsh Hawk, _Circus cyanus hudsonius_. Breeds sparingly in West Virginia close to the Fayette County line, and I have seen the species in summer on the elevated plateau near Markleysburg.

Bob-white, _Colinus virginianus_. Unaccountably missing from Burleigh's list. Permanent resident, less common on the higher plateau east of Chestnut Ridge.

Woodcock, _Philohela minor_. Breeds regularly in small numbers on the less elevated plateau just west of Chestnut Ridge, near Whitehouse. I have also noted it in summer between Markleysburg and the Maryland line.

Great Horned Owl, _Bubo virginianus_. Sparingly distributed throughout the heavier forests of the mountain ridges. It may often be heard calling, particularly during thaws in late winter. I hear the notes much less frequently in summer.

Barred Owl, _Strix varia_. Scattered permanent resident, much more common in some of the glady woods on the elevated plateau near Markleysburg.

Nighthawk, _Chordeiles minor_. A few pairs nest regularly on roofs in Uniontown.

Pileated Woodpecker, _Geoploerus pileatus_. A permanent resident in small numbers throughout the mountain forests. A few pairs nest just north of Lake Lynn near Point Marion.
Red-bellied Woodpecker, Centurus carolinus. Locally common permanent resident in the southern part of the county, even on the higher plateau. Forests and groves of mature oak are favored localities.

Acadian Flycatcher, Empidonax virescens. Locally common breeding bird, especially in the beech-maple forests which clothe the ravines to the west of Chestnut Ridge. It occupies every suitable site north of Cheat River in the Point Marion neighborhood.

Prairie Horned Lark, Ototrochus alpestris praticola. A locally common permanent resident, especially on golf courses and landing fields. Less common in summer on the high plateau.

Blue Jay, Cyanocitta cristata. Another species overlooked by Burleigh. Common on both ridges and the higher plateau. Uncommon or absent along the Monongahela River, except in migration or in winter.

Black-capped Chickadee, Parus atricapillus. Burleigh's notes would make it appear that this species is found throughout the county in summer. Actually it occurs only in the more elevated sections, particularly along the two high ridges. Breeding birds may well be of the Appalachian race (P. a. practicus).

Carolina Chickadee, Parus carolinensis. This species was omitted in Burleigh's article, apparently by accident. It is abundant and widely distributed from the Monongahela River to the slopes of Chestnut Ridge. Examples are doubtless referable to the northern race (P. c. extimus).

Bewick's Wren, Thryomanes bewickii. A regular, and locally common, breeding bird at least from Fairchance and Smithfield south. I have not found it so frequently on the elevated plateau, although the birds do occur near Markleysburg.

Carolina Wren, Thryothorus ludovicianus. It is difficult to see how Burleigh overlooked so common and well distributed a permanent resident as this species. Not common in summer, and probably absent in winter at the very highest elevations.

Eastern Mockingbird, Mimus polyglottos polyglottos. Within recent years this species has appeared as a local summer resident near the Pennsylvania-West Virginia line. I have found it near Point Marion on a number of occasions.

Veery, Hylocichla fuscescens. Of this species Burleigh says, "A plentiful summer resident, equaling in numbers the preceding species (the wood thrush)." Locally this may be true, but no account is taken of the fact that the veery is entirely absent from the Monongahela River valley and the lower plateau, whereas the wood thrush is well distributed throughout. I doubt that more than twenty percent of the county has a breeding veery population.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Polioptila caerulea caerulea. Burleigh had only a single migrant, with no breeding data. Those birds are common summer residents in thickets, orchards, and open oak woods throughout the southern part of the county. They occur commonly to the summit of Chestnut Ridge. I have seen a nest near Whitehouse in May, 1941.
Migrant Shrike, *Lanius ludovicianus*. Shrikes are nowhere common, so far as I have been able to determine, on the slopes just west of the Allegheny ridges, but I have found a single individual of this species in a Crataegus thicket near Fairchance.

Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*. At the time of Burleigh's writing this species had not apparently, spread through the county. It is now an abundant and well-distributed permanent resident.

White-eyed Vireo, *Vireo griseus*. Now a fairly common, and characteristic, bird in the Monongahela valley, and along the lower Cheat. It abounds in the thickets of crabapple, locust, redbud, and hawthorne.

Yellow-throated Vireo, *Vireo flavifrons*. A fairly common breeding bird along the ridges, particularly at intermediate elevations. No so common in the lower river valleys.

Blue-headed Vireo, *Vireo solitarius*. Locally common at higher elevations. West Virginia birds from just across the border average nearer the southern race, *V. s. alitcola*.

Warbling Vireo, *Vireo gilvus*. Common in the soft maples and elms in the valleys, especially in and near the towns.

Worm-eating Warbler, *Helmitheros vermivorus*. Fairly common in the heavily wooded ravines, particularly at intermediate elevations.

Golden-winged Warbler, *Vermivora chrysoptera*. Where standing dead chestnut trees abound on the slopes and ridges these birds are locally common. The males use the chestnuts for their singing trees.

Parula Warbler, *Setophaga americana*. Burleigh found this bird rather scarce and restricted to hemlock. It is now common at intermediate and higher elevations, and breeds in deciduous, as well as in coniferous, forests.

Magnolia Warbler, *Dendroica magnolia*. This is a fairly common nesting species in hemlock thickets, or among the dense chestnut sprouts which have sprung up over much of the area. I have not found it below 1600 feet elevation in the county.

Black-throated Green Warbler, *Dendroica virens*. Burleigh records a nest in a white oak tree, and it is notable that the species in this area is fully as common in deciduous as in coniferous forests. I have not found it along the Monongahela River.

Cerulean Warbler, *Dendroica cerulea*. A characteristic bird of the oak forests near the Monongahela River from Point Marion to Brownsville, I have not found it on the higher ridges.

Blackburnian Warbler, *Dendroica fusca*. Likes the oak forests on the higher slopes, particularly where dead chestnut trees offer good singing perches, I have not found it below 1200 feet.
Prairie Warbler, Dendroica discolor. This is a species which has very obviously been extending its range in recent years. I did not find it in Fayette County until the summer of 1941, but it has been present in increasing numbers since that season. In 1943 a nest with three eggs was found in a Crataegus thicket four miles southeast of Fairchance. I first saw it on June 3, but the nest was destroyed a few days later.

American Redstart, Setophaga ruticilla. Common to abundant throughout; in many places the most numerous of the breeding warblers. It is very difficult to see how Burleigh overlooked the species.

Orchard Oriole, Icterus spurius. Burleigh called this "possibly the rarest of the breeding birds found here during the summer months". That condition certainly does not obtain today, particularly in the southern part of the county. There the birds are common summer residents, especially in orchards.

Cowbird, Molothrus ater. Another generally distributed bird the omission of which from Burleigh's paper seems unexplainable.

Cardinal, Richmondena cardinalis. Of this bird, Burleigh writes, "This species occurs somewhat sparingly about thickets of laurel and rhododendron on the mountain sides". No mention is made of it at lower elevations where it is now one of the most common and characteristic of permanent residents. It is found in good numbers throughout.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Hedyema ludovicianus. Another species concerning which Burleigh's comments are indefinite. He says, "a fairly plentiful summer resident", a statement which is true today only of the higher ridges and the elevated plateau between them. I have never found the bird along the Monongahela River in Fayette County.

Savannah Sparrow, Passerculus sandwichensis. Whether or not it represents a recent range extension, this species is now fairly common in open sloping pasture fields and meadows of the eastern portion of the county.

Grasshopper Sparrow, Ammodramus savannarum. Common at suitable spots throughout the area.

Henslow's Sparrow, Passerherbus henslowii. Concerning the recent range extensions of this species there can be no doubt. I first found it in Fayette County during the summer of 1944. The birds were present at least three places along the highway from the West Virginia border to Hopwood.

Vesper Sparrow, Poecetes gramineus. Another common breeding species unaccountably missing from Burleigh's account.

Bachman's Sparrow, Aimophila aestivalis bachmanii. A few birds have been present for the last several years in the vicinity of Whitehouse, south of Fairchance.
Notes from Nicholas County, West Virginia

On November 9, 1944, while birding along Meadow River, near Mt. Lookout, I captured a crippled least bittern, *Ixobrychus exilis exilis*. It apparently has flown into some obstacle, probably a wire that had been stretched near where I found the bird. The bird still had considerable fight in it but after a few hours it died. As this is my first definite record for this species I thought it best to send the proof to you, which I am doing. Also seems, from the literature on the subject, that this is rather a late record.

We have two known wintering mockingbirds in Mt. Lookout this winter. Mine showed up a few weeks ago in the same winter territory where it had previously wintered for, at least, two years. Last week Alton McClung heard a mocker burst into song at 1:30 one night. He found it the next day on an area covered by holly and briers. By bird has both kinds of berries plus wild grapes.

Probably you will remember that last fall I told you about numerous ducks migrating over here. I haven't seen a duck nor have I heard reports of a single one thus far. A flight of "honkers" passed over about a week ago. Our fall migration was pretty light with the exception of the abundant tail-wagging palm warblers that passed through. The myrtle warbler was almost as numerous. I am glad to report many red-headed woodpeckers at present for they have been rather scarce for some time. Beech mast is pretty heavy and I suppose that is the reason they have concentrated here.

— W. C. Legg
Mt. Lookout, W. Va.

Swainson's Warbler in Harlan County, Kentucky

On the morning of July 5, 1944, the writer began an all day hike down the west slope of Big Black Mountain, Harlan county, Kentucky, elevation 4400 feet above sea level. During the descent, various northern forms of bird life were noted. In late afternoon at a lower elevation (estimated 2100-2300 feet above sea level) rhododendron thickets along small almost dry streams dotted the landscape. From one of these thickets came the loud, clear, ringing song of the Swainson's warbler, *Limothlypis swainsoni*. Closer investigation permitted a short glimpse of the bird, then it moved upstream quite a distance where it sang several times and was not observed again that day.

The following morning, July 6, 1944, upon returning to the neighborhood, the writer heard this species, seeing one of the birds at two other stations and heard it again in practically the same spot where it was noted the day before. The distance between bird number one and three was estimated at three-quarters of a mile and the station where each bird was recorded was about the same distance apart from the bird nearest it.
Swainson's warbler has been reported as being observed in Letcher county, adjoining Harlan, in similar ecological situations.

--- George H. Breiding
108 West Woodruff
Columbus, Ohio

Flight of Nighthawks in Kanawha County, W. Va.

A flight of nighthawks, Chordeiles minor, of considerable proportions was observed about 6:30 p.m. September 1, 1944 at Charleston. Engaged at that time in typing notes for THE REDSTART, I glanced up from the typewriter to note large numbers of birds flying toward our Kanawha Village apartment from the west. They were nighthawks and were in such numbers that I went outdoors to watch the birds and attempt to count them.

Until 7:15 p.m. the flight continued and my count reached 639 individuals. I have no means of knowing how long the flight had been in progress before it was noticed, but it seems safe to estimate that at least 1,000 birds were involved since I probably saw several hundreds from the window of our apartment before I proceeded outdoors to attempt a count.

The birds were flying almost due east and at medium height, rarely deviating from their course to swoop aside as if feeding before continuing on their way. It was by far the largest flight of its kind I ever had witnessed.

--- John W. Handlan
409 41st St., S.E.
Charleston, W. Va.

European Widgeon in Central Ohio

On March 12, 1944, above the O'Shaughnessy Dam, Delaware county, Ohio, while on a field trip with the Columbus Audubon Society, a small flock of baldpates was seen resting on the ice. Some were huddled down on the ice, while others were standing with their heads tucked under their wings. As some of the birds shifted about, Dr. Donald Borror called our attention to one bird that was marked and colored differently from the rest. He identified it as a European widgeon, Mareca penelope. Other members in the party had the bird pointed out to them and could easily distinguish the difference from the surrounding baldpates.

The European widgeon is recorded irregularly in this locality. Some years one to several are observed, while in others it does not occur or is not recorded.

--- George H. Breiding
108 West Woodruff
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House Sparrow Improvises a Drinking Fountain:

During late August and on several occasions, I watched a male house sparrow, *Passer domesticus*, drink from a dripping water faucet in Kanawha Village, Charleston, W. Va. The faucet, used for attaching lawn sprinklers, apparently had a faulty washer and dripped water slowly from its mouth to the ground, about 18 inches below. The sparrow, presumably the same individual, was seen on a number of occasions to perch on the spigot, lean over and catch the drops of water as they fell, instead of drinking from a puddle on the ground from which numerous other birds drank in more orthodox fashion.

— Polly A Handlan
409 - 41st St., S.E.
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Summer Record of American Merganser in Eastern Panhandle

On June 22, 1944, about six miles northwest of Shepherdstown, Berkeley County, West Virginia, while making some observations along the shores of the Potomac River, I heard a splashing sound of waterfowl leaving the water. Heavy foliage obscured my first view. Upon arriving at the bank, I saw a duck-like bird out near the middle of the stream, but still trying to rise from the surface. I could see only a dark back at first but as the bird swam downstream I was able to identify it as a male American merganser, *Mergus merganser americanus*. Before the bird drifted out of sight I noticed some mottling on the back.

This species is known for the difficulty it has in rising from the water. This bird may have been ill or injured, or a transient beginning to molt, since it seemed to be flightless or nearly so.

— George H. Breiding
108 West Woodruff
Columbus, Ohio

Six Species of Woodpeckers Recorded in Ten Minutes:

Six of the seven species of woodpeckers known to occur in West Virginia were recorded by the writer within the space of 10 minutes time at the Fayette County 4-H camp, near Beckwith, on February 5, 1943.

Species recorded were: flicker, *Colaptes auratus*; pileated woodpecker, *Dryocopus pileatus*; red-headed woodpecker, *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*; yellow-bellied sapsucker, *Sphyrapicus varius*; hairy woodpecker, *Dendrocopus villosus*. Only the red-bellied woodpecker, *Centurus carolinus*, was absent from the "10-minute list".

The writer arrived an hour early for an appointment with the Fayette county agricultural agent with whom he was to inspect the camp site and its equipment. He left his car with the idea of a walk about the grounds of the camp and, as he did so, from a field near the parking area five flickers rose and flew into trees nearby. He followed them up and as he watched them, saw two downy wood-
peckers on large beech trees.

A familiar, cat-like note called attention to an oak nearby where a yellow-bellied sapsucker moved about and, in the same tree, was a single hairy woodpecker. Stills were moving about in the grove of which this oak was a part and, on approaching it, a fine red-headed woodpecker was noted in flight. Some three minutes later, the notes of a pileated woodpecker were heard and a brief walk enabled the observer to catch a fleeting glimpse of an example of this species as it flew from sight.

The writer had checked the time of his arrival at the camp site. After noting the pileated he again looked at his watch to establish the fact that these woodpeckers all had been seen within 10 minutes time. It had been necessary to walk scarcely 200 yards from the car to list these six species of woodpeckers.

— John W. Handlan

409 41st St., S.E.
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The Starling as a Mimic

From the first part of January to May, 1944, the writer occasionally made notes of some of the calls, notes and sounds imitated by the starling, Sturnus vulgaris. Referring to some of these field notes, the following observations are presented as evidence of this species ability to imitate.

Meadowlark - This call given in rather a muffled tone but well done.

Bobwhite - The full bobwhite song given, as well as the call used to resemble a scattered covey.

Catbird - On January 30, 1944, a starling was seen twice to emit the call (mewing note) of this species. It was practically impossible for this observer to distinguish the note as one coming from other than a catbird.

Wood Pewee - Many observers note this imitation frequently.

Chickadee - The two syllabled song heard, indicative of the black-capped.

Baltimore Oriole - Part of this song was imitated; about the first three notes

Robin - The low chuckling or "laugh note". Also one that might be called an alarm note.

Myrtle Warbler - A starling emitted a note that could have been mistaken for the sharp "chip" note of this species.

Flicker - Imitated the familiar call note.

On various occasions individual starlings were seen and heard to give notes
suggestive of the redwing's call note and also the bobolink's and black-throated green warbler's songs.

On April 22, 1944, a lone starling was heard to imitate the following species in this succession: bluebird — song; robin — alarm note; flicker — call and sounds often heard during the courtship performance; bobwhite — song; meadowlark — song; English sparrow, cedar waxwing, song sparrow — call note. Following the imitation of the meadow, a long drawn out whistle was given.

April 25, 1944 — It was not out of the ordinary to see a pair of flickers cross my line of vision on the campus of Ohio State University. The birds were soon out of sight, but calls could be heard given by this species, a series of "weechoo", "weechoo", "weechoo", "weechoo". Also was heard the usual nasal call note "kee-yeer". Imagine my surprise when a starling was discovered to be the vocalist. Unseen, but in the direction where the flickers had gone, sounds could be heard which made one feel sure that they were coming from that species.

At the time, the writer wondered if the starling saw the flickers and was prompted to call to them or whether it heard them and was giving answer. Nevertheless, the observations given in the foregoing notes firmly convinces the writer that the starling with all his faults and criticisms levelled at him, ranks high as a musical mimic and in intelligence.

On two occasions, there was heard a well known whistle that has been associated with service men when they see a young lady passing by. Upon tracing these particular whistled notes to their sources, it was learned they came from none other than our friend, "Vulgar sturnus". After these last observations, the writer, for one, is ready to go on record as proposing that the nomenclature of the starling be changed to Sturnus vulgaris wolfius (a la G.I.

— George H. Braiding
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