

COMENTÁRIOS

New World Blackbirds: the Icterids

Alvaro Jaramillo and Peter Burke. CIDADE: Princeton University Press, 1998. 432 pp., ISBN: 0691006806. US\$52,50 (hardcover).

Blackbirds will surprise you. Jaramillo and Burke have done a great service to Latin American ornithology and avian ecology with this book on the blackbirds. The book itself is very well written, comprehensive, and well organized. The Introduction states that one of the purposes of this book is to stimulate interest in this often mostly ignored group, and the book does just that, beginning with gaping, one of the adaptations of the Icterids that make them unique.

The book is surprisingly well researched, and appears to be very current on the newest taxonomies. In the section titled Systematics and Taxonomy, the authors go to great pains to describe their choices in the classification schemes. Here, the book provides a reminder (or a small lesson) of species concepts (biological and phylogenetic) and what they mean for readers of this book. This is followed by a discussion of nomenclature and subspecies. Each of these sections provides a brief summary of the important points in debates in these areas and puts them in the context of the Icterids. Few “guides” to birds go to such lengths (while I do not wish to imply that this book is a field guide, it has the format of a guide book nonetheless).

With the descriptions of plumages and topography, the high quality of the art in this book is already apparent, about which more below. The sketch of a typical blackbird, and the terms that they will use in the book are all well done, and very clearly written.

A section on behavior and evolution sets the stage for why this book is really good. That is, with a discussion of behavior and evolution, the authors demonstrate that these birds are varied and have fascinating behavioral adaptations. Displays (bill-tilt, song-spread, bow, and others without names) are varied and complex, and offer many potential studies of mating and reproductive success. Also, in describing these displays it is clear that they are phylogenetic trends, and which suggest that these species could provide fascinating and insightful research programs of natural selection and evolution. Of course the authors mention that these birds have already been studied and have contributed to the elucidation of old ideas, and the introduction of new ones on mating systems, among others. In explaining the

role of the blackbirds in these research programs, the authors provide us again with a brief, and insightful, summary of sexual selection, sexual dimorphism, mating system theory, and so on. The reminders in this introductory section of the book are welcome, for they leave the reader prepared to think more deeply and critically about the diversity we find in the species accounts and plates.

Before the plates, the explanations of the species accounts tells us what we can find in perusing the book: identification, voice, description (more detailed than the identification), geographic variation (which is described in great detail when appropriate), habitat, behaviour, nesting, distribution and status, movements, moult, measurements, notes, references, plates, captions and maps. A small, but useful, glossary is also provided.

The art in the plates is wonderful. Each and every plate provides the detail necessary to identify each and every species and most local variation as well. When necessary to help in identification, the plates include several postures, including flight, display and so on, that clearly resolve the subtle differences that are being illustrated. I am a hard critic of illustrations that do not illustrate (I won't mention them here, but there are many), and here I found nothing to complain about. The unique shapes of the bill of many species are authentically illustrated, as are the postures of the birds (and many posture variations are illustrated). I also enjoy the “natural” backgrounds that have often been painted to help contrast the color or to provide life to the illustrations. In the text there are other illustrations in black and white that “fine-tune” the reader's ability to separate the species. For example, on page 313 is a series of drawings of heads of black icterids – clearly an identification nightmare. But, the illustration does the job of showing the subtle differences in head or bill shape, and so the birds are, if not “easily” identified, at least more easily so. One exception is the comparison of the Red-breasted and White-browed Blackbird females on page 281 – I can't tell them apart, but perhaps that is just the point, and they are not sympatric anyway.

After the plates are the species accounts. As in the

previous sections, it is clear the authors went to great pains to pay attention to detail. The descriptions are well written, and complete without being wordy. In the measurements, I would have liked to have found, instead of or in addition to the minima and maxima, the standard error (or deviation, since they give the sample size), so that confidence intervals could be calculated for the eventual necessity of comparing two species, or juvenile males and females of the same species.

The text descriptions often provide a bit of natural history, comparative biology, and behavior all put into a nice package. For example, on page 376 they describe the mating system of *Molothrus aeneus*, the Bronzed Cowbird. "No pair bonds are maintained, and the mating system is polygamous. The mating system has been regarded as an 'exploded lek' similar to many hummingbirds (Trochilidae) and some shorebirds. A lek is a shared 'meeting place' where males display and females visit solely for the purpose of mating; males do not offer any resources other than sperm. In an 'exploded lek' the males are not all clustered at a central site, but are spread out over a larger zone..." Thus, we get information on the breeding system of the cowbird, and we can put it in the context of larger theory. Each species account seems to have some gem like this that provides the reader, and perhaps especially young scientists, a detail to spark an interest in that particular species.

For Latin Americans this book is especially relevant, for while most North American species are either well studied, or very-well-studied, the opposite is true in South America. The authors are aware of this disparity and so they mention when a species may be interesting but is poorly known and so would be a good research prospect. For example, the Yellow-rumped Marshbird (*Pseudoleistes guirahuro*) is common where I live in southern Brazil, but the authors recognize that it is poorly studied, for they state "The breeding system of this species has not been studied, but 'nest-helping' should be looked for." A small push for someone interested in breeding systems to take this common species on as a study animal, plus a hint for something specific to look for.

One disappointment for me, an American living in Southern Brazil with research in Panamá, is the lack of

common names for any of the species in Spanish or in Portuguese. Common names are notoriously difficult to get right, but many are surprisingly simple. All the black blackbirds in Brazil (to my knowledge) are called *Chopim*, and so one mention of this name would take care of a long list of birds. Many species have no common names, and many common names are repeated among species. However, if a researcher wishes to ask locals for help, any close estimate is better than none (as I have had fun finding out, for example in Panamá I discovered that some locals said Bellbirds were Kingfishers). Latin American ornithologists know and often use only scientific names. But, Latin Americans in general are not ornithologists, and so local names can be very useful.

Speaking of names, I found only two that I have problems with: the Para Oropendola and the Chopi Blackbird. Perhaps it is just the lack of accentuation that makes these confusing. Pará (note the accent) is a state in Brazil, and so the bird's name should have that accent. English-speakers are likely to say "Pára" with the accent on the first syllable rather than the correct way with accent on the second. The same is true with the Chopi. In Portuguese, words ending in "i" have the accent on that "i." And so it should be pronounced Chopí to be correct. I have also seen the word spelled "chopim" which is indeed the local Portuguese word for black blackbirds, and which also gets the accent on the last syllable. Minor details, but when an English speaker visits Brazil and says either "Pára" or "Chópi" nobody will know what he or she is saying.

In sum, this is a wonderful book of rare quality and I highly recommend it for the scientist or enthusiast of birds in general. It is also a wake-up call to encourage researchers to spend more time on this group of birds with many potential research topics. The enthusiasm of the book also encourages the reader to just pay more attention to these often drab (and more often colorful) birds with equally-often fascinating behaviors.

James J. Roper

Universidade Federal do Paraná, Caixa Postal 19034, 81531-990, Curitiba, PR, Brasil. E-mail: jjr@null.net