

A Rusty Blackbird in Yolo County, California

Tim Manolis, 808 El Encino Way, Sacramento, CA 95864

Bruce Webb, P. O. Box 2845, Granite Bay, CA 95746

At approximately 0800 on 10 October 1995, we arrived at the Spreckels Sugar Ponds, along County Road 20 about .4 mi. E of County Road 102 and about 2 mi. E of Woodland, Yolo County, California, in search of a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*) reported at the ponds a few days prior. We set up spotting scopes and began examining the sandpipers and other birds foraging around the margins of the large, partly-flooded pond north of the road.

While looking through Least Sandpipers (*Calidris minutilla*) in the southwest corner of the pond, Manolis spotted a blackbird foraging among the sandpipers along the water's edge. Struck by its bright coloration and pale eyes, he asked Webb why it was not a Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*). As we studied the bird through our spotting scopes at a distance of 40-50 m, we decided it was that species. Although we had the bird in sight for only about 5-10 minutes, Manolis made a quick sketch and Webb took a few of photos with a 600mm telephoto lens. The bird eventually flew north to join other blackbirds in vegetation along the west levee about halfway down the length of the pond. When it dropped into cover we lost track of it. Despite intensive searching, by us and others that day and subsequent days, the bird was never relocated. The following description is based on Manolis' field notes and sketch (Fig. 1):

Not strikingly different in size and shape from Brewer's (*E. cyanocephalus*) and Red-winged (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) blackbirds in the vicinity. Most like Brewer's Blackbird in posture and "jizz." **Crown, nape and mantle:** Rusty brown, brightest on forecrown. Feathers of back and scapulars with darker centers, giving impression of blurry streaking. **Face:** Dusky gray cheek area, darkest around eye and between bill and eye. Supercilium bright buff. **Rump:** Slate gray, contrasting with darker tail and rusty back. **Underparts:** Throat and upper breast buffy-yellowish, blending with mottled effect into darker gray of sides, belly and undertail coverts. **Wings:** Gray-brown, tertials edged with rusty, also rusty tips to greater coverts. **Tail:** Dark, blackish. **Bill:** Blackish, conical, with sharply-pointed tip. **Eye:** Iris ochre-yellow. **Feet:** Dark gray. No vocalizations were heard.

McCaskie (1971) discussed the status of Rusty Blackbirds in California and elsewhere in western North America, and the general pattern of occurrence he documented has changed little since then (e. g., see discussion in Roberson 1980). The majority of records are from October through December, with a decided peak in November, at desert oases south and east of the Sierras and along the coast; occasionally, birds are found wintering, rarely in spring.

For whatever reasons, reports from the Central Valley have been slow to accumulate until recently, although the earliest record for the state is of a bird collected in the Sierran foothills, at Drytown, Amador County, 15 December

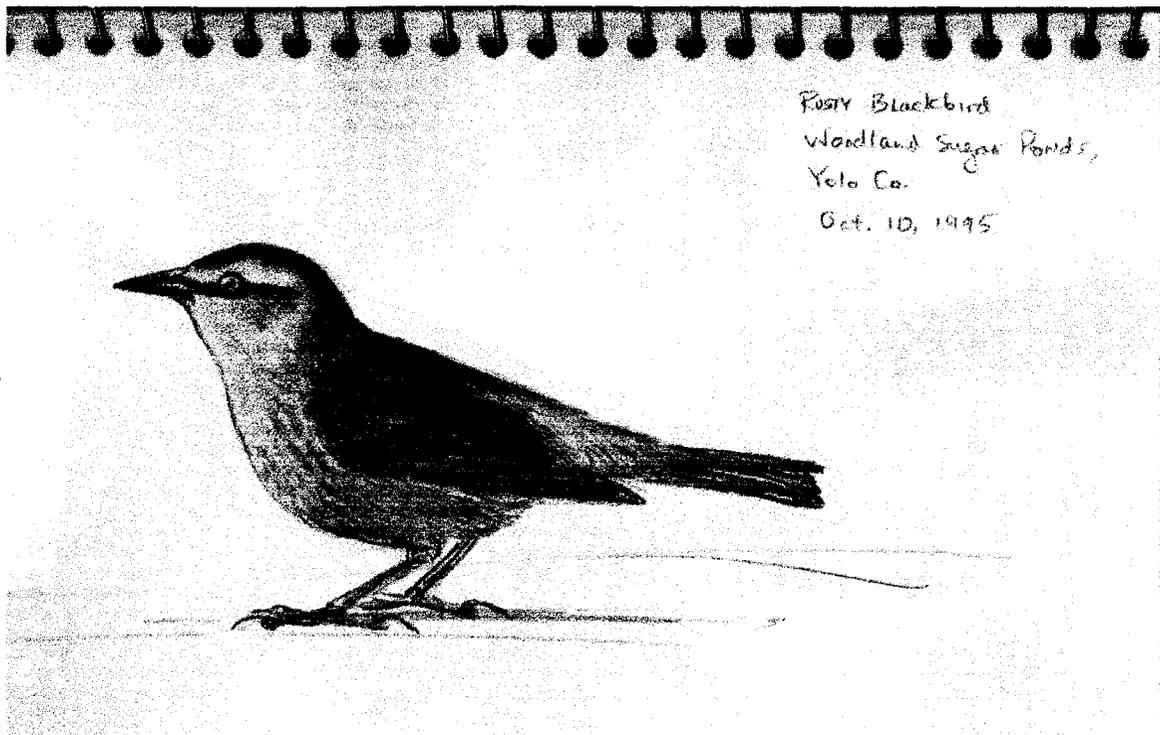


Figure 1. A Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*) at the Spreckels Sugar Ponds, Woodland, Yolo Co, California, on 10 October 1995.

Field sketch by Tim Manolis

1895 (Mailliard 1904, McCaskie 1971). Since 1985, there have been a handful of reports of Rusty Blackbirds in the San Joaquin Valley. Records of this species for San Joaquin County include one photographed at the White Slough Wildlife Area on 29 November 1987 by George W. Welch (Campbell et al. 1988) and one reported seen on Ringe Tract on the Stockton Christmas Bird Count, 12 December 1993 (W. Holt pers. comm.). In Stanislaus County, at least one (possibly another) was seen 29 December 1991 and again (one bird only) on 5 January 1992 on the Faith Ranch, about 7 mi. west of Modesto (H. Reeve pers. comm.). We could not obtain documentation for two reports for Merced County, from February 1985 (Bailey 1985) and February 1997 (Harold Reeve, pers. comm.), and consider them hypothetical (while encouraging any observers of these birds to produce supporting details). In Kern County, a Rusty Blackbird present in Bakersfield 17 January to 7 February 1998, reported by Barbara Maxwell, was believed to be the same individual seen in nearby Arvin on 15 November 1997 (McCaskie 1998). Note that, in general, there is a chronological progression from north (earlier dates) to south (later dates), a pattern in which the Yolo County record fits nicely.

The report documented here, recently reviewed and accepted by the Sacramento Bird Records Committee (SBRC), is the first record for Yolo County and, apparently, for the Sacramento Valley floor. (A 1990 report for Sacramento County was not accepted by the SBRC [Manolis 1994]).

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