

Exit the Dickcissel—A Remarkable Case of Local Extinction

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THE Black-throated Bunting, or Dickcissel, of the Atlantic coast plain, is a bird of the past. This fact has been emphasized by the experience of the last fifteen years. In that period perhaps a dozen stragglers have been seen or shot in the extensive regions reaching from South Carolina to Maine and from the eastern foothills of the Alleghanies to the Atlantic coast. This large area was, in favored spots, especially in the lowlands, meadows and valley bottoms of the tidal plain, the breeding ground of thousands of this species in the days of Wilson, Audubon, Nuttall, Cassin, Woodhouse and Baird. Even up to near the days when John Krider was preparing his "Forty Years' Notes of a Field Ornithologist," in the year 1879, the once familiar bird lingered in its Philadelphia county haunts. My own first rambles as a full-fledged bird collector in the vicinity of Frankford, Philadelphia, in the years 1877 to 1880, with my friend W. L. Collins, revealed a remnant of the Dickcissel host yet breeding in certain grass and grain fields bordering the old Bustleton turnpike and Castor road a mile outside of Frankford. Two or three fields in that immediate vicinity on the Levick, Shallcross and Comly farms, were the only spots known to me in the whole circle surrounding Philadelphia at that distance, or indeed anywhere in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, where the bird could be taken.

In short, I made the acquaintance of the Black-throated Bunting only three or four years before its final disappearance as a regular summer visitant in Pennsylvania. This fact is confirmed by the list of records accompanying this article, which shows the bird's status in this and other counties of the State and in New Jersey.

In the present paper, it is my intention merely to speak of the bird in its relation to the Delaware Valley. With this object first in view, I soon became convinced that it would be fully worth while to collect all our literature relating to its history in the east Atlantic region with a view to discover, if possible, the causes of its extirpation. This larger subject it is proposed to touch upon in a future paper.

A few words more regarding my personal experience with the bird in our State. A year or two before I ever saw one, Mr. Collins had written to me of it as one of the prizes of his locality. He was about seventeen years old at that time, a year or two my senior, and had recently been entrusted with one of his deceased father's guns. This was cause of much envy, as I had not been allowed the use of any more effective weapon against the poor birds than a "slap-jack." Armed with his gun and a copy of the original quarto edition of Wilson's Ornithology, my good friend soon added the Dickcissel to his catalogue of known rarities.

Three or four pairs of breeding birds seemed to be the total of one season's observations in that vicinity and when we went farther away there were none to be found. I remember seeing the bird on only three or four occasions, and then only when the male mounted a telegraph pole or wire along the Castor road and sang his tireless two-by-three ditty with such provoking regularity that I could not long refrain from firing a stone at him, in spite of my friend's warning to spare him till we could find the much-coveted and rarely-discovered nest. Collins often sat on a fence rail for hours and days in the hot June sun watching a pair of these birds as they capered around the grass fields with the double intention of rearing a brood and fooling him as to the whereabouts of their nests. Frequent were his letters to me touching upon this topic, and if he found one nest in a season he was happy. They usually nested in a full-blown tussock of daisies or the narrow-leaved dock in the open grass fields reserved for mowing. Their nests were placed on or near the ground and the eggs secured were always blue, lacking the subdued spots and lines reported by other observers as sometimes occurring, a condition denied by some but well proven by good authorities in oology.

I find by a careful examination of our correspondence during the period between 1877 and 1883 that Mr. Collins' notes on this species represent a most continuous and valuable set of data regarding the status of this bird on the Atlantic coast plain, during its period of final extinction as a summer resident in an area where it was very abundant locally during the lives of Wilson and Audubon. They show too that its disappearance from the Delaware Valley was contemporary with its final adieu as a summer resident in the District of Columbia. Coles and Prentiss, in their list of 1861, call it an abundant summer resident around Washington, but in 1883 they say of it: "Now, however, the bird appears to have forsaken us, few, if any, being heard of for the past few years." In Massachusetts, their northeastern breeding limit, where they never were abundant as in the Middle States, the records show a similar dwindling down to about 1880, all the last breeding records occurring in the seventies. It was my off-hand opinion before consulting these records that the extinction of this species was sudden, indicating a catastrophe during migration or at some critical period in the bird's winter life in the tropics which had involved the whole eastern contingent of Dickcissels. But such does not seem to have been the case. Our earliest accounts of the bird, given by Wilson, Audubon and Nuttall, show it to have been abundant in the Delaware Valley in all places suited to it, especially in meadows and low-lying grass fields in the clay-loam districts, but not in sandy or light soils or at higher elevations.

Briefly stated, it was in such situations a universally common and familiar bird. My friend, Dr S. W. Woodhouse, who was the companion of Nuttall and other Philadelphia bird-hunters in the early forties, says that this was also the status of the Dickcissel at that time. During the fifties and sixties the records are meagre, but there are enough data to show that the bird was fairly abundant in Connecticut, Long Island, near Hoboken, N. J., and in the District of Columbia, up to late in the sixties and probably later. But in the early seventies, when I first began to take intelligent notice of birds, the Dickcissel was not to be found breeding in any part of Camden county, New Jersey, as in Dr. Woodhouse's time, nor was it known in those parts of

Pennsylvania which I frequented most—Delaware and Chester counties, nor in any other part of Philadelphia county than the one already mentioned near Frankford. We must conclude therefore that a very marked diminution in the number of the Dickcissels had been going on for at least ten or fifteen years previously to 1870. The history of their final decadence in the Delaware Valley is given in the records appended to this paper.

But what has caused this remarkable local decadence and disappearance? This is the paramount query of every one interested in this unique case. I say unique. So far as I can recollect there is no parallel to it in this country where a species of migratory bird inhabiting in summer, two stretches of lowland country separated by a mountain chain but wintering in common territory, should be extirpated from the eastern branch of that breeding area, and at the same time increase in the western one. The persistency of migratory individuals in returning to their natal homes is one of the recognized instincts of birds. On this account we would be slow to believe that the Dickcissel history here recorded indicates merely a *deflection* of the migrating host and not a case of extinction or extirpation. On the other hand, we know of no local causes of decrease. Our native birds of similar range and habits in the Middle States have shown no serious diminution. The English Sparrow and the pot-hunter do not figure especially in the life economy of the Dickcissel. It has been suggested by some that the mowing machine at nesting time did the business. It is true that the great increase in use of mowing machines covers the later period of their disappearance; but it appears they were diminishing before the day of mowing machines. Then again in the west, where they are as numerous as ever in the most highly cultivated regions, the mowing machine is quite as fatal as with us. Why should a mowing machine be more fatal than the old mowing scythe? Both of them cut at or below the level of the average nest of this species, which is generally a few inches above the ground, and often much higher. If it can be proved that the eastern birds always nested on or very near the ground in mowing fields and the western contingent generally in bushes and such places as were not mowed or were avoided, there would

seem to be a solution. I thought I might prove this at one time, and there is data to support such a theory, but enough exceptions have been noted to make it too weak an argument.

Returning again to the migration phase of the question, I would reassert the belief that there was no period during the decadence of the Dickcissel on the Atlantic coast plain where it *suddenly* disappeared again to reappear, as we have known to be the case with the Bluebird in a large part of the same region a few years ago. I doubt not this sudden dearth of Bluebirds was due to a catastrophe which destroyed them during the fall migration or the following winter in immense quantities and probably in a short space of time. I have no records which indicate such a happening to the subject of this sketch. Even if such existed, what are we to say? The gentle Bluebird has re-peopled its old haunts and makes us rejoice in its Phoenix-like indifference to calamity, but poor "Dick" seems to have left us forever. Reasoning upon the all too meagre data at hand may be useless, perhaps it is dangerous, but I would rather believe that the Mississippi Valley stock of Black-throated Buntings had gradually influenced their trans-Alleghany brethren to accompany them in their spring flight to the western breeding grounds than believe that the eastern birds were exterminated. Many local causes may have aided this, but probably the strongest agency for the deflection of eastern birds into western territory must be sought for in their status during winter residence in the tropics and in the meteorological conditions attending the spring migration. But this subject cannot be more than tentatively taken up in such a brief paper as this. I shall hope by these remarks, however, to incite others to a study of it and to elicit more data which lies slumbering in older minds and manuscripts as well as in many a forgotten printed page. If this is forthcoming, I may be heard from again on this theme.

The following notes relate to the Black-throated Bunting, as found in Eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey:

About 1800-1811. Alexander Wilson, Amer. Ornith., 1811, vol III, p. 86. "They arrive in Pennsylvania from the south about the middle of May; abound in the neighborhood of Phil-

adelphia and seem to prefer level fields covered with timothy or clover. They nest on the ground. Every level field of grain or grass is perpetually serenaded with chip, chip, che, che, che. In traveling through different parts of New York and Pennsylvania in spring and summer, whenever I came to level fields of deep grass, I have constantly heard these birds around me."

1825-1832. Thomas Nuttall, *Manual Ornith.*, 1832, vol I, p. 461. "These birds arrive in Pennsylvania and New England from the south about the middle of May and abound in the vicinity of Philadelphia," etc. Evidently based on Wilson, above. In the early forties, Dr. Woodhouse used to observe this bird abundantly in his walks with Nuttall around Philadelphia and adjoining counties.

1825-1835. Audubon, *Ornith Biog.*, vol IV, 1838, pp 579, 580. "Although this handsome Bunting may be said to be abundant in our middle Atlantic districts, it is much less so than in the vast prairies of the southwest. * * * Abundant on the open lands of Missouri and Illinois, but rarer in Ohio and scarce in Kentucky. They are rarely observed to pass over South Carolina but in Pennsylvania they are plentiful, and there breed in every field covered with grass or grain. I have also met them in Massachusetts, but beyond this they are not to be seen to the eastward." In late summer, "I once went from Philadelphia in search of them, accompanied by my friend Edward Harris and my son John Woodhouse. Having reached Salem, in New Jersey, we rambled some time in the neighborhood and found an elevated piece of ground, closely covered with high rush weeds, among which a great number of these birds had assembled. It being late in July, the males were moulting," etc. "These birds are very partial to particular localities. Sandy soil, unmixed with clay or earth, is not favorable to them, and it is probably for this reason that none are found in any purely sandy part of the State of New Jersey."

1844-1845. S. F. Baird, *Catalogue of Birds near Carlisle, Cumberland county, Pa.*, Silliman's *Amer. Jour. Sci.*, 1844, and *Lit. Rec. Linn. Assn.*, Pa. College, 1845, p 253. "Common, summer."

1840-1850. Dr. S. W. Woodhouse. "Philadelphia, Decem-

ber 28, 1903. Dear Mr Rhoads: In reply to your question in regard to the Black-throated Bunting, I would state that in the forties, when I was so much in the country and closely observing the habits of our birds, it was very common and was to be seen and heard in every grass field in the eastern portion of this state [Pennsylvania]” Dr Woodhouse also tells me that it was found in Camden county, N J, in almost equal numbers at that time. After the year 1850, he was not engaged in this field.

1850-1860 F. M. Chapman, Auk, 1891, p. 395 “Mr. C. S. Galbraith informs me that forty years ago the Dickcissel was a common summer resident near his home at Hoboken, N. J.”

The continuity of our notes is here badly broken. Data regarding this period is particularly desirable. It covers a time when the activities of Delaware Valley ornithologists were at a standstill.

1860. Vincent Barnard. Birds Chester Co, Pa, Ann. Report, Smithsonian Inst, 1860 (1861). “April 27 to May 3” This note refers to the dates of their arrival during ten years’ observations in the county See also his manuscript note under C. J. Pennock below.

1862 John Cassin, in Smith’s History Delaware Co., p. 438. “Frequent.”

1863. Ezra Michener Birds Chester Co., Pa., Report U S. Dept. Agric., 1863, p. 303 “Summer resident Common.”

1868. W. P. Turnbull. Bds. East Pa. and N. J. “Plentiful.”

1868. C. C. Abbott, Geol. N J. (Cook), p. 779. “Rare. Appears in meadow lands in May, but none probably remain during the summer. Re-appears in September, and remains for several weeks, in few numbers.”

1869 Libhardt in Mombert’s History Lancaster Co., Pa. “Resident—frequent. Breeds in the county.”

1870-1871. Thomas H Jackson: “West Chester, Pa., December 31, 1903. I regret to say that I can give little information concerning the ‘Dickcissel.’ The only eggs (a set of 6) in my collection were taken near Lancaster, Pa., by Chas. H. Nauman about 1870 With the exception of a single specimen seen and heard near West Chester a year or two later I have no recollection of any occurrence here.”

1871. C F P[hulps], Forest and Stream, vol VI, 1876, p. 67. "A nest with eggs found July 4, 1871 near Avondale [Chester Co.], Pa."

1874 Witmer Stone. "Nest and eggs taken near Eagle Hotel, Radnor Twp, Montgy. Co., Pa., in 1874, by D N. McCadden and Geo C. Thayer—eggs in Mr Thayer's possession." Mr. McCadden tells me further that the nest was in a currant bush in a garden, and was very conspicuous because of being made of bleached green grass. The bird was a rare species in that region, even then

1871-1875. Charles J Pennock, in letter of December 30, 1903 "This bird was fairly abundant in southern Chester county, Pa., up to 1875 but seemingly locally distributed as to breeding places. I recall two localities where we always expected to find the birds in nesting season, one near the village of Avondale, where nests were found in the Osage Orange hedge at roadside, the other locality was one-half mile south of Kennett Square I have frequently heard the male singing from a few scattered trees or bushes by the roadside but never found a nest. I moved away from the neighborhood of Kennett Square in spring of 1875, returning spring of 1880, since which time I have never seen the bird in this county. Vincent Barnard, in MSS on Birds of Chester county in my possession about 1860, lists it as 'Known to be a Chester county bird,' and indicates it as being in his collection In Dr. Warren's list of the Birds of Chester county, Pa, Forest and Stream, February 5, 1880, he says, 'Rare, arrives April 27th to May 7th, I have never known it to breed.' In his list of breeding birds of Chester county, Pa., from Daily Local News (newspaper), September 3, 1885, he says, 'This species seems to be somewhat plentiful in the southern portion of the county during the summer,' but I suspect he was inferring this from old records of Michener, Barnard, etc." Mr Pennock further tells me he never saw the bird in Pennsylvania after 1875, having gone to Ithaca, New York, for a few years' schooling, during which time it became extinct in his home locality. He first became acquainted with it about 1871, and never knew of more than two or three pairs which always affected certain spots.

1876. J. Thomas, in Davis' History Bucks Co., Pa., Appendix, p. 33 "Occasionally seen."

1876 Thomas Gentry, Birds E. Penna., vol I, p 328. "Tolerably abundant in eastern Pennsylvania." Mr. Gentry evidently does not make this and his following remarks on the Dickcissel from personal experience. It is more a record of its past history than of conditions in 1876.

1877. The following specimens were all taken by my friend W. L. Collins in the immediate vicinity of his home near Frankford at Bustleton pike and Castor road.

June 4. Nest and 4 eggs in grass field along Castor road at foot of daisy tussock Eggs advanced in incubation.—Collins

Aug. 25. Yg female—Collins. In Coll. of Witmer Stone.

Aug. 30. Ad. male.—Collins In Coll. of Witmer Stone.

1878. W. L. Collins The following notes are quoted from letters written to me by Mr. Collins:

May 19. "There seem to be quite a number of *Euspriza americana* about here this season."

June 2 Two males collected in the past week.

June 4. Just as we [Trotter and Collins] had got out of our lane [Levick farm] into the Castor road we saw a pair of black-th. buntings" After describing the actions of the birds near their nest in the field he states, "I knew there was a nest at the foot of the daisy bunch, so over I went and there, sure enough, was a beautiful nest with 5 nice blue eggs in it"

1879. Spencer Trotter, Bull Nutt Ornith Club, vol. iv, p 235. "A few pairs of these birds breed regularly every year in a small area of county north of Philadelphia [Levick and Shallcross farms near Frankford], but in no other locality in this neighborhood have I authentic information of their being seen In former times this bird was quite common here, but has now become comparatively scarce"

See also Trotter in Forest and Stream, vol. xii, No. 2, p. 25, for similar statements

1879. John Krider, Forty Years' Notes Field Orn., Phila., 1879, p. 49. "Many years ago this was a very common bird about Philadelphia, but for some seasons it has become rare."

1879. W. L. Collins. In letter June 3 "shot a male *Euspriza* but lost it"

1879. Dr W. L. Abbott A specimen obtained by him near Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, June 7, is in the collection of the Academy of Natural Sciences.

1879 Spencer Trotter. A female taken by him June 13, near Frankford. Now in Bryn Mawr College Collection.

1879. Spencer Trotter, Bull. Nutt. Orn Club, vol. iv, p. 235. "A few pairs of these birds breed regularly every year in a small area of country north of Philadelphia, but in no other locality in this neighborhood have I authentic information of their being seen. In former times this bird was quite common here, but has never become comparatively scarce.

1879. W. L. Collins In letter June 15. "Spencer and I went after birds a little while in the afternoon and succeeded in getting a female Black-throated Bunting."

June 29th. "I found a nest of *Euspiza americana* in the orchard [Levick's] which had been cut down by the mowing machine"

1879. W. L. Collins, The Friend, Phila., vol. 52, 1879, p. 114. "Though this bird may not be familiar to most readers of the Friend, it is not by any means rare in some of the states, though in the eastern portion of our own [Pennsylvania] it is not frequently met with. It appears to inhabit certain localities, while in others it is rarely seen. For instance, there is a district of country about six miles north of Philadelphia where some five or six pairs of the species can be seen every summer, and these birds are confined to an area of not more than one mile square. * * * They make their appearance in Pennsylvania from the south about the 12th of 5th mo, and commence nest building about the 1st of 6th mo. * * * The nest is placed in a bunch of daisies or burdock, generally three or five inches from the ground, and is composed of fine dried grass and the roots of plants. It is lined with horse-hair. The eggs, which are four or five in number, are of a uniform pale bluish color, about the size of a Bluebird's."

1880. W. L. Collins, in letter. July 2 "Went up to Bustleton on horseback about a week ago. Saw a great many *E. americana* on the way."

1881. W. L. Collins in letters. July 10. "Heard a

Euspiza americana this morning. They are getting rather scarce about here. I should not be surprised if in a few years they would disappear entirely from this neighborhood "

October 7. "I did not see one this summer, though I did hear them several times "

1882. W. L. Collins in letter. Last May or early June. "I have not seen nor heard a Black-throated Bunting this season."

1888. Dr J Percy Moore, of Philadelphia, furnishes me the following from his journal The locality is in Montgomery Co., Pa. Under date of May 13, 1888, the following is recorded:

"A pair of Black-throated Buntings were seen here," and further on "In a grassy meadow along Mill Creek not far from Merion Square a male Black-throated Bunting was observed on the ground apparently feeding on fallen seeds. He perched on a small bush and chirped for a few moments and then flew into a thicket, probably to seek a roosting place as the sun was getting low." Dr. Moore writes me in addition as follows.

"The first observation was made in a meadow along the Old Gulph road near Arrowmint creek in Lower Merion township, and among cultivated fields At the time I was much engrossed in watching the antics of courting Bobolinks which were common that morning in the small trees and bushes along the fence rows, and the duller birds evidently did not draw my attention for more than a passing moment from their fascinating competitors. I am quite certain that the Black-throated Bunting was seen on other occasions in the same region, but the above are the only references in those portions of my notes which have been indexed "

Extraordinary as these notes may appear, so long after the disappearance of the bird from that region, I have no reason to doubt the correctness of Dr. Moore's identification He tells me that there was an unusually large wave of migrants passing through that day, and that he did not think the Dickcissels were anything but migrants. They are known to associate with Bobolinks in their winter home as well as in the fall migrations, and were no doubt going farther north. Such spasmodic appearances of migrants are to be looked for, but are rarely noted

1890 Witmer Stone, Auk, 1891, p. 245. "One bird in immature plumage obtained from a gunner who shot it with Reed birds on Maurice River, New Jersey, September 18. Now in the collection of W L Baily, Philadelphia, Pa."

Stone, Birds Eastern Pa. & N. J., 1894, p. 421. "Twenty years ago this was a common species in certain parts of New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania, though always of local distribution."