

The Broadwing



Publication of the Montclair Bird Club

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Western Bluebirds are meant to brighten everyone's day. This trio was seen on the bird club trip to New Mexico in March. Let us know how you feel about changing the masthead with each issue.

President's Message April 2020

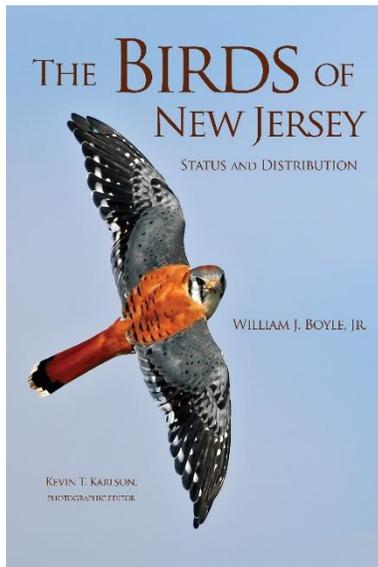
Everyone is aware that our regular monthly meetings are on hold for the foreseeable future. But canceled Bird Club meetings remain a trivial concern compared to on-going crises. Hopefully, increasing the frequency of the Broadwing will offer members and friends a respite and an additional opportunity to stay connected.

This issue is timed to be delivered on April 8th when our regular meeting would typically take place. Rick has generously contributed one of his erudite articles. I also have a short account of trip to Panama. Hopefully, other members will be inspired to contribute to the next issue. The plan is to make the Broadwing a monthly until regular meetings can resume.

While our traditional content has revolved around members' trip, sightings, and a myriad of other outdoor experiences, maybe we can vary that a little bit. I would love to see contributions from members that deal with social distancing, coping with closed parks, but more importantly any work that makes us feel good about anything. If we get enough material from members, May will be the Member Issue. Please send your story of any length to MontclairBirdClub100@gmail.com.

Sandy

The last issue went well, so we'll try it again. Suggestions, corrections and even compliments are welcome.



The Birds of New Jersey: Status and Distribution

William J. Boyle Jr.

2011 **Book**

Published by: [Princeton University Press](http://www.pupress.com)

Princeton University Press is offering a free download of *The Birds of New Jersey*. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/34069>

THANK YOU

The club has received two checks from the NetworkForGood and would like to thank the kind person that created our account, and possibly direct additional contributions.

In This Issue

The first of the two articles that follow is by Rick Wright. It will allow you to follow the Purple Sandpiper from the late 1700s until present time.

The second article illustrates a trip to Panama where the author encountered more than birds.

Field Trips

All field trips are open to Bird Club members and the public at no charge. When scheduled field trips resume, notices will be sent to the entire membership.

It's Not Easy Seeing Purple

Rick Wright

with thanks to Dan Lewis, Huntington Library, and to Lauren Williams, McGill University Library

In the first volume of his *Synopsis of British Birds*, published in 1789, the English artist and natural historian John Walcott presented an engraving by Peter Mazell of a sturdy, somber-plumed “Tringa” shot “on the coast of Devon in the winter.” In the terse diagnosis accompanying the plate, Walcott described the bird as possessing a “bill slightly curved: upper part of the plumage a dark purple.” ([Walcott 1789](#)) Obviously inspired, Walcott called the



species the “Purple Sandpiper,” the first known use of what is now this bird’s official English name.

That purplish sheen for which Walcott named the sandpiper is one of the most elusive colors in nature. In the diagnosis of the type of his *Tringa* (now *Calidris maritima*, Morten

Thrane Brünnich makes no mention of any such tinge, describing the sandpiper’s upperparts simply as “fuscous with ashy fringing [*cinereo undato*].” ([Brünnich 1764](#)) Brünnich’s principal source, his countryman Hans Strøm, also notes only that the bird’s back is “black ... with all the feathers rather pale on the edges” ([Strøm 1762](#)), as did their great successor Johan Ernst Gunnerus (in [Leem 1767](#)).



Photo by Marty DeAngelo

It was not just the Scandinavians who failed to notice the color. As late as 1798, a decade after Walcott coined the English name “Purple Sandpiper,” George Montagu described the species—which he incorrectly thought was new—as simply “black, edged with ash-colour” above ([Montagu 1798](#)). Only four years later did Montagu recognize the bird, which he had assigned the only dubiously “English” name

Phayrelarn Sandpiper, as identical to Walcott’s and add the phrase “glossed with purple” to his description of what he too now called the Purple Sandpiper. ([Montagu 1802](#))

Montagu was pushed to that conclusion by John Latham, the industrious English compiler whose major ornithological publications appeared over a span of nearly half a century. Sometime before 1785, Latham corrected another colleague, the Welsh naturalist Thomas



Pennant, who in 1766 had mistaken the Purple Sandpiper for the Red Knot (Pennant 1766).

Pennant noted that the specimens he had at hand “differ[ed] a little in colors” from earlier descriptions of the knot, a reservation borne out fully by the illustration accompanying his account: the dramatically posed

individual in Peter Paillou’s attractive plate is obviously a Purple Sandpiper, “the back and scapulars dark brown, edged with ash-colour” and the trailing feet a lovely orange (Pennant 1766).

In 1785, Pennant followed his colleague Latham in recognizing Brünnich’s *Tringa maritima* as a distinct species. Both borrowed the Icelandic name “Selninger” for the bird, another indication of how poorly known this shorebird remained in Britain. And both added a new element to the species’ traditional description: For the first time, in identical words, they observed that the sandpiper’s back was “tinged with violet.” (Pennant 1785; Latham 1785)

The ultimate source of that added detail is unclear, though. Though Pennant speaks in the *British Zoology* of 1766 of having examined multiple individuals of the sandpiper, his autoptic studies then did not reveal, or at least he did not find worthy of mention, any colors more vivid than sooty brown and gray. (Pennant 1766) Latham in 1785 gives no indication of his ever having handled a specimen, purplish or not, and the only one among the authorities he cites to mention purple is Pennant’s *Arctic Zoology*, published almost simultaneously. (Latham 1785; Pennant 1785) It thus seems likely that the innovation was Pennant’s—especially given that in 1790, in the second volume of his grand *Index ornithologicus*, Latham removed any mention of purple from his description of the species’ upperparts (Latham 1790).

In deleting the purple from his prose, John Latham was swimming against the tide of history. Walcott had coined the name “Purple Sandpiper” a year earlier, in 1789. In that same year, Johann Friedrich Gmelin introduced the color into the Linnaean tradition, describing the

bird, in obvious reliance on the earlier publications of Latham and Pennant, as having “the middle of the back violet.” ([Gmelin 1789](#)) William Jardine would later go so far as to claim that the color “in some positions, appears very conspicuous” ([Jardine 1833](#)), an assessment jarringly unlike that of most modern observers.

Even among those early ornithologists who followed Pennant, Gmelin, and Walcott in insisting on the sandpiper’s colorful upper parts, however, there was obvious confusion about what they were—or what they thought they were supposed to be—seeing. While the early authors agreed that the purple gloss was visible only in winter plumage and only on the back, a generation later such greats as Thomas [Nuttall \(1834\)](#), [Audubon \(1835\)](#), William [Swainson](#) and [John Richardson \(1831\)](#), and others followed the lead of Charles Lucian Bonaparte, who in 1828 pronounced the entire upper parts in “summer dress purplish-black varied with white and rufous” ([Bonaparte 1828](#)), a significant departure from the more modest claims made by their predecessors.

Most modest of all, perhaps, was Thomas Bewick, who on examining a specimen bluntly proclaimed that no ornithologist could “say why [this species] has been called the Purple Sandpiper ... it has not a shade of that colour on its plumage.” ([Bewick 1832](#)) Bewick’s view matches that of most modern birders, who see no more than a mixture of dark gray and pale enlivened only by the bright orange of the feet and bill base.

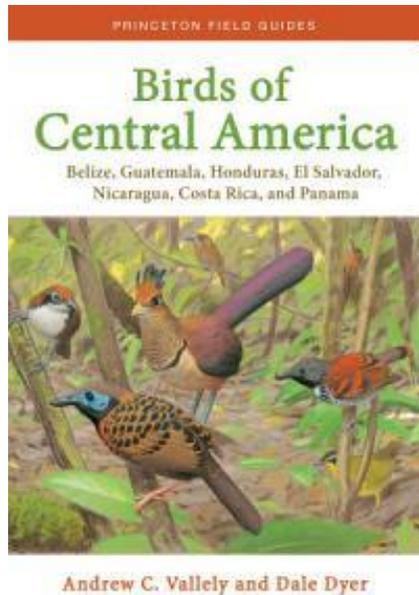
Is the Purple Sandpiper truly purple? The authoritative handbooks of our day ([Ridgway 1919](#); [Payne and Pierce 2020](#)) agree that there is a “faint purple gloss” on the back of basic-plumaged birds, and at least some winter specimens do indeed show an odd murky [lavender-gray in the lesser coverts](#)—a feather group almost always concealed to the point of near invisibility on the living bird. What birders and photographers see in the field, though, on those infrequent occasions when any purple at all is visible is something else, not the “back” or the feathers of the wrist at all. At some angles, in some lights, the ashy or frosty fringes of the scapulars and the contour feathers of the wing combine, in a mysterious optical alchemy, with the fuscous vanes that underlie them to glow an outlandish violet. The effect is the more beautiful for its transience, and for its reminder that behind even the oddest bird name there always lurks a story.

Rick Wright leads Birds and Art tours in Europe and the Americas for [Victor Emanuel Nature Tours](#). His most recent publications include the Peterson [Reference Guide to Sparrows of North America](#) and the ABA [Field Guide to Birds of New Jersey](#). Rick and his wife, the medievalist Alison Beringer, live in Bloomfield with their family: Avril, budding birder, and the world's best birding dog, Gellert.

Books, Birds, and Ants

-Sandy Sorkin

Six birds appear on the cover of Valley and Dyer's *Birds of Central America*. The four larger birds in the foreground remind me of a painful day in Panama with army ants crawling on my legs. A quick check of Wikipedia tells me:



“The name army ant is applied to over 200 ant species in different lineages. Due to their aggressive predatory foraging groups, known as "raids", a huge number of ants forage simultaneously over a certain area.”

The rest of the Internet discussion is a bit problematic. On one hand, humans shouldn't be particularly concerned about being eaten, only to uncover in the next paragraph that army ants are voracious hunters. My personal impression is that they are voracious, and though they were probably considering eating me, there was easier prey not wearing heavy boots.

Superficially, you might think that generally it would be simple enough to avoid swarms of army ants. If your entire knowledge of army ants stems from watching African jungle movies, then you know to be afraid. If you are a birdwatcher with a camera, it is an entirely different scenario.

As a group, the birds on the cover are not easily observed on birdwatching excursions. But the birds all share a common imperative to follow swarms of army ants. Not small or medium swarms, but to concentrate on large swarms. In Panama that day, a hiker with binoculars approached us and we naturally asked if he had seen anything interesting. I don't recall the entire answer but clearly heard the phrase “massive swarm of army ants.” That was enough to get us walk quickly searching the roadside ahead until we located the swarm.



Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo

Initially, it didn't seem like much of a swarm. A few ants here and there, mostly on the ground and a few on the branches and more at the base of trees. But it didn't appear that there was anything of concern. The ants hadn't reached the trail but were marching parallel to the road at least 15 feet into the jungle.

While I stood there watching, a pair of Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoos flew in and landed on the raised roots of a medium-sized tree. From their perch the Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoos jumped and caught any arthropod that hopped or flew too close trying to escape the ants. At this point, the concept of avoiding the ants was still lost on me, but I love the two pictures I captured.

Photographing a rare bird is an experience, and a beautiful rare one is exceptional. Then it got better. Then another uncommon bird, the Ocellated Antbird joined the group to feed on anything escaping the ants. It is not quite as lavishly adorned as the Rufous-Vented Ground-Cuckoo but is also exceptionally beautiful.



Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo

The ants make the birds' day and this day was a very good one. In short order two more antbirds flew in and took posts above the ant swarm. The Bicolored Antbird is slightly more common than the first two birds and show up in small numbers. It is their call that shows other birds to the presence of ant swarms. A Spotted Antbird flew in almost immediately also looking for a meal.

At this point, I had pictures of the four main birds on the cover of the book.



Ocellated Antbird

After the fourth bird arrived, I started to feel considerable pain in both legs. I was so engrossed in picture taking, I failed to notice the quantities of ants advancing up my pant legs. There is some question in my mind about the difference between the ants biting me or simply tasting. Either way it hurts.

My immediate problem became getting away from the ants that had surrounded me. There are no hand holds to help with

balance because everything is covered with ants. But I got out and joined the other birders that were smarter than I was about moving. In retrospect, it was worth it. I still enjoy the pictures and my bites eventually healed.



Bicolored Antbird



Spotted Antbird

The MBC Bulletin Bird

Broadwing publication schedule

**The Broadwing is published five times a year:
January, March, May, late summer, and October.**

**Send photos, field notes, or articles to the editor at
oguss.editor@gmail.com or mail to Elizabeth Oguss,
200 Valley Road, Montclair, NJ 07042. Thanks!**

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From the Desk of the Very Temporary Editor:

Please feel free to e-mail me with any items you would like included in future issues of the Broadwing. Please include pictures and any other news that will reduce anxiety and make us smile.

MontclairBirdClub100@gmail.com

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