

Townsend's Bunting in Ontario?



Have we recovered one of J. J. Audubon's famous "mystery" birds?

A bird photographed at Prince Edward Point, Prince Edward County, Ontario, caused a bit of a stir earlier this year. On May 14, 2014, Kyle Blaney came across an odd-looking bird he couldn't identify. After a bit of pondering, Blaney suspected it was a Dickcissel—a rarity in Ontario, especially away from the southwestern part of the province. But he also thought there was something strange about the bird, so he managed to get several close shots of it and started asking for input. Speculations quickly ensued on various online forums, such as the listserv Frontiers of Bird ID (tinyurl.com/Frontiers-mystery-bird), ABA's "Rare Birds" Facebook group (tinyurl.com/ToBu-Facebook), and iBird (tinyurl.com/PEP-mystery-bird).

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Suggestions were all over the place: Sagebrush Sparrow, Blue Chaffinch, an odd-looking Dickcissel with abnormal plumage, or a hybrid. The hybrid possibilities were just as scattered: various combinations of New World sparrows, and various inter-genus and inter-family hybrids with the Dickcissel (Dickcissel x Blue Grosbeak, Dickcissel x Bobolink, Dickcissel x House Sparrow, and others). We may

This striking bird (left), found and photographed at Prince Edward Point, Prince Edward County, on May 14, 2014, prompted the obvious question: What is it? Discussion erupted in various online social media forums (top right). Was the bird a rare vagrant like a Sagebrush Sparrow (middle right)? Could it have been an aberrantly marked Dickcissel (bottom right)? This article explores the possibility that this bird was one of John James Audubon's famous "mystery" birds, in this case the one known as "Townsend's Bunting" (sidebar, p. 32).

never know what this bird was exactly, as it was apparently never seen again. Whatever it was, it certainly had the experts—among them David Sibley and Peter Pyle—scratching their heads.

Structurally, the bird has many features one would expect from a Dickcissel (shape, size, bill, etc.), but many of the colors are quite wrong for that species. This has led several birders to suggest that this bird is a Dickcissel exhibiting an abnormal pigmentation, such as a lack of carotenoid pigments (which would normally give the birds its yellow breast) or melanism (an over-abundance of black pigments, possibly explaining the overall grayish body). Unusual plumage aberrations like leucism (irregular plumage coloration), albinism (lack of feather pigmentation), melanism, and xanthochroism (unusually yellow pigmentation) grab our attention in the field, but they are well known and have been widely encountered—and perhaps not particularly exciting from a purely scientific perspective; see Jeff Davis's article, "Color Abnormalities in Birds: A Proposed Nomenclature for Birders," in *Birding*, September/October 2007 issue, pp. 36–47.

But something more complex could be at play here.

Sibley moved the discussion in this direction when he posted on the ID-Frontiers list (tinyurl.com/Sibley-To-Bu-discussion) that a single color mutation probably would not be sufficient for a Dickcissel to look like the Prince Edward Point bird. Another consideration

nudges the conversation from the realm of pure bird ID to ornithological history.

The Prince Edward Point bird involves not only Pyle and Sibley, but also John James Audubon. It turns out that this bird has a historical link to an old lithograph painted by Audubon, based on a bird collected by his friend John Kirk Townsend on May 11, 1833 in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The bird was so distinct from anything else known that Audubon believed it was a unique species to which he gave the name *Spiza townsendii*, or Townsend's Bunting, in honor of his friend. Until the discovery of the bird at Prince Edward Point, some 181 years later, no other specimen resembling Townsend's Bunting had ever been found.

Townsend's Bunting is one of the famous "mystery" birds, or nonce birds, painted by Audubon that he believed were valid species. Other of these mystery birds include Washington's Eagle (*Falco washingtonii*), Carbonated Warbler (*Sylvia carbonata*), Morton's Finch (*Fringilla murtrei*), Small-headed Flycatcher (*Sylvania microcephala*), Blue Mountain Warbler (*Sylvia montana*), and Cuvier's Wren (*Regulus cuvieri*); Jeff Holt, in a 2002 article in *Cassinia* (tinyurl.com/Holt-Cassinia), gives a readable introduction to Audubon's mystery birds. Some of these mysteries have been resolved. For example, Mor-

Dickcissel. Blue Mounds State Park, Rock County, Minnesota; June 2014.
Photo by © John Duren.



In the digital era, the discovery of an unusual bird immediately triggers discussion and speculation online.



Sagebrush Sparrow. Crowley Lake, Mono County, California; March 2007.
Photo by © Bob Steele.



ton's Finch was actually a Rufous-collared Sparrow from South America mistakenly thought to have been collected in California. Others, among them Townsend's Bunting, have remained subject to speculation and doubt.

Unlike Audubon's other mystery birds, *Spiza townsendii* is attested by an extant specimen, housed at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. In 1985, ornithologist Kenneth C. Parkes examined the specimen and concluded that it was a "schizochroistic" Dickcissel, one lacking yellow pigment; the results of Parkes' investigation were published in 1985 in *Natural History* (tinyurl.com/KCP-Nat-Hist). Earlier ornithologists had hypothesized that this Townsend's Bunting was a hybrid or an extinct relative of the Dickcissel. Whatever Audubon's was, it apparently was never again sighted—until now perhaps.

Townsend's description of the original specimen, as well as Audubon's illustration of it, together provide a surprisingly good fit for the Prince Edward Point bird found and photographed by Blaney (see sidebar, below).

There are, to be sure, some differences between the recent Ontario bird and the Audubon–Townsend bird. Of particular note is the presence of a white wing bar on the Ontario bird. Also of interest are the absence of clear streaks on the

The "mystery bird" at Prince Edward Point has not been seen since the day it was discovered and photographed.

Was the bird in fact Audubon's "Townsend's Bunting"? If so, it is the first since Townsend's initial discovery, close to 200 years ago.

Photo by ©
Kyle Blaney.



breast (faint ones are visible), a slightly darker iris than described by Audubon and Townsend, and the lack of rich brown epaulets. But if one accepts the hypothesis that both birds represent aberrant variations of the same species, one might not expect them to be identical.

Despite a few differences from the Audubon–Townsend bird, I believe the Prince Edward Point bird is in fact a Townsend's Bunting, that is, a Dickcissel showing aberrant pigmentation. It is indeed unfortunate that the bird was never seen again; a feather and subsequent DNA and pigmentation analysis might well have shed light on the bird's origin. And such evidence might have clarified the status of one of Audubon's famous mystery birds.



John Kirk Townsend's Description

from Ruthven Deane, *Auk*, 1909; tinyurl.com/Deane-Auk

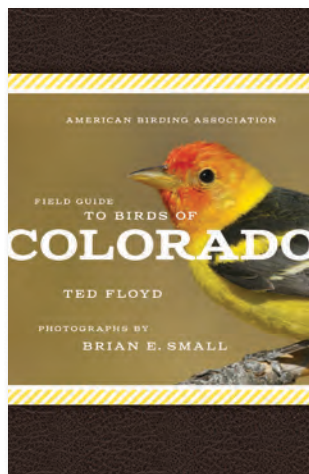
Male—Upper mandible black, middle edge white, lower light blue with a longitudinal line of black extending from the point half way to the base; iri[s]es light hazel; head dark plumb[e]ous, indistinctly spotted with black; cheeks and breast light plumb[e]ous; line over the eye white; throat white, with a black line extending from the base of the lower mandible down each side of the neck and terminating on the breast in a few small oval spots; outside the black line on each side of the throat is a broader stripe of white ending with the base of the auriculars; back varied with black and brown; wings plain dusky, the first and second primaries equal and longest, the lesser coverts edged with pale brown; shoulders yellowish white; rump and emarginate tail uniform with the wings; breast tinged with ochreous, the color gradually deepening upon the belly; below and inferior tail coverts brownish-white; legs and feet dusky. Length 5¾ inches. Extent 9 inches.

The bird pictured here—by John James Audubon—was collected in 1833 by the naturalist John Kirk Townsend in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The ornithologist Kenneth C. Parkes speculated that this bird, called "Townsend's Bunting," was a Dickcissel with unusual pigmentation.

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