



The Katharine Ordway  
Natural History Study Area

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ORDWAY BULLETIN  
No. 98

MACALESTER  
COLLEGE

located at 9550 Inver Grove Trail (Dakota County Road 77), Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

A PASSAGE of BLACKBIRDS at ORDWAY.

It was almost the end of October and late in the afternoon. Walking back through the meadow I stopped for a look at the birds flying overhead. It was a column of blackbirds pointed toward the southwest, where the declining sun was already throwing long shadows across the landscape as it started to lose its brightness in the gathering clouds on the western horizon.

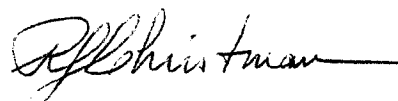
They came relentlessly, like army troops in a semblance of ranks at a height of about 150 feet or a little less. Typically they flew in the flap-flap-flap-flap-glide manner which blackbirds use, folding their wings tightly against their bodies after taking a few wingstrokes. Thus they continued at a steady rate toward some goal ... and they sputtered endlessly, a sort of monotone, not at all communicative - as one might say of a flight of geese - but more like some attempt to keep up courage, something like soldiers chattering during a rout march.

They were a mixed lot and I could make out an occasional Red-winged Blackbird and the Rusty Blackbirds were conspicuously smaller; also present were Grackles, considerably larger. It is typical of blackbirds that they marshall in ever-increasing flocks and not at all segregated so that one can usually find any of four or five species amongst such a gathering, including Cowbirds. They were probably heading for some cornfield area not far south and there they would consolidate with a larger group until their numbers would become enormous before flying on to spend the winter months along the Texas Gulf coast, centering on Galveston and thereabouts.

Standing in the meadow I kept a mental note of the elapsed time of the first flight - just less than three minutes, I reckoned. They were moving at perhaps fifteen miles per hour and they presented a column about six birds in width and about ten feet apart. In one minute an object moving at 15 mph will travel 1320 ft.; figuring 2-3/4 minutes in length means there was a column of birds about 3600 feet in length. If 10 feet apart there would be about 360 "ranks" of six birds each, a total (est.) of 2200 birds.

The contingent which I was watching was followed after a lapse of about 15 seconds by a second and larger serial, perhaps twice the size. Then, as I walked back up the meadow hill, I saw first a small group of perhaps 100 birds - a sort of "connecting file" - with an even larger flight following; I estimated this as being about equal in numbers to the first two serials. Thus one could contemplate having seen about 13,000 or more blackbirds on their way to some intermediate rendezvous which would ultimately land them in southern climes for their wintering.

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R. J. CHRISTMAN,  
Naturalist