

## Northern Mockingbirds in Britain

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**ABSTRACT** The identifications of four separate Northern Mockingbirds *Mimus polyglottos*—in Norfolk in August 1971, in West Glamorgan in July–August 1978, in Cornwall in August 1982 and in Essex in May 1988—have been accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee. After assessing the relative likelihood of vagrancy and escape from captivity in each case, the BOU Records Committee assigned two to full inclusion on the British & Irish List in Category A (Cornwall and Essex), one to Category D (West Glamorgan) and one to no category, as a certain escape (Norfolk). This joint paper documents all four records.

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### Northern Mockingbird in Norfolk

The following account was submitted to the BBRC.

A Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos* was present at Blakeney Point, Norfolk, during 22nd–25th August 1971. Its identity was never in doubt once we had the opportunity to check in an American field guide and discuss our observations with a lady familiar with the bird in the USA. Ted Eales took several hundred feet of film of it (so no written description was submitted to the Rarities Committee). It spent most of its time in or near the Tree Lupins *Lupinus arboreus* near the Lifeboat House, and occasionally visited the plantation or laboratory (like most passerine migrants, it found that the lupins in the fenced-off area near the Lifeboat House afforded the best protection from predatory gulls). Its plumage was not perfect, and we considered that it must have been a juvenile.

People who did not see the bird, or saw it only briefly, have dismissed it as an escape. Ted Eales and I had it living just outside our back door for four days, and

we spent many hours watching and filming it at close quarters from the lookout on top of the house, and we are convinced that it was a genuine wild bird (though ship-assisted passage cannot be ruled out), for the following reasons:

1. The species is rigorously protected in the USA, and its capture or export prohibited. Kelling Aviaries have, for instance, tried for many years to obtain one, without success.
2. It gave every impression of being a wild bird. It had no difficulty in feeding itself: it spent a lot of time picking over the kitchen refuse in our rubbish pit, and ate many Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae* caterpillars that were on a clump of Common Nettles *Urtica dioica* among the lupins (it obviously disliked the spines on them, and would spend a long time bashing one on the ground before swallowing it), and it also ate a few of what looked like slugs.
3. It arrived in a general fall of passerine migrants, at a recognised migration arrival point, and in the main migration season.
4. The preceding weeks of westerlies were ideal for bringing a bird over from the USA.
5. There were a number of American birds in this country at the time [a Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* in Lancashire and two White-rumped Sandpipers *Calidris fuscicollis* in Lincolnshire/Norfolk, *Brit. Birds* 65: 322-354].
6. When it arrived, it was very hungry and its plumage very tattered, as if from a long journey. Its first action was to start feeding, and it was feeding almost continuously for the first couple of days.

*P. R. COBB*

### Northern Mockingbird in West Glamorgan

On 24th July 1978, whilst on holiday in the Gower area, my brother, G. J. Rawnsley, and I visited Worm's Head, an island owned by the National Trust. The weather in the area during the preceding few days had consisted of strong southwesterly winds of almost gale force.

The Inner Head, a high rise of land with a steep northerly side facing the sea, and a more gentle southern slope which leads to the rocky causeway across to the mainland, is partly covered at its lower level with gorse *Ulex* and Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*. As we approached the gorse area, we became aware of a bird, about the size of a Blackbird *Turdus merula*, sitting in the top of the bushes. It was generally grey in colour, with a long tail and some dark on the wings. I was at a loss as to what it was; my first thoughts were of shrike *Lanius*, Lesser *L. minor* or Great Grey *L. excubitor*, with neither of which I was familiar, but I began to discount shrike because the bird did not have a hooked beak and did not have a black eye-stripe. There were also Linnets *Carduelis cannabina* sitting in the same spot.

We were able to study the bird and make notes:

Approximately size of Song Thrush *T. philomelos* or Blackbird (Linnets were nearby for direct comparison). Grey from head, down back and onto uppertail. Underparts creamy white; underside of tail white. No distinct eye-

stripe, but appeared to be slightly darker around the eye. Bill black, straight, not hooked. Wings appeared to be dark grey-brown, with some white specks and faint evidence of a double wing-bar when folded.



**Plate 126. Northern Mockingbird** *Mimus polyglottos*, Worm's Head, West Glamorgan, 29th July 1978 (Harold E. Grenfell)

When in flight, the white bands went *across* (rather than *along*) the wing and the wings were quite broad, 'fingered' towards the end. White sides to tail evident only in flight. The

length of the tail appeared to be approximately equal to the length of the bird's body. The legs were dark, and quite long.

We watched the bird through a telescope on magnifications of 45×, 30× and 15× at distances of as little as 6 m. The bird occasionally took insects while perched in the gorse; sometimes it perched high and at other times low down in cover. We also saw it running on the ground, snatching insects from the air and also pecking at the ground on the grassy slope directly in front of us, where it was almost too close to use binoculars.

When in flight, which was never for more than about 30 m, the bird hardly flapped its wings, but tended to glide with some slight undulation (perhaps caused by the gusty wind).

We watched the bird for approximately 30 minutes and were joined by the local Assistant National Trust Warden and a holidaymaker, but neither had any idea of what it was. We then left the headland.

The next day, we consulted books at H. E. Grenfell's house and were able to identify it as a Northern Mockingbird. We visited Worm's Head again on 28th July, 1st August and 3rd August. On these visits, we made further observations, noting that the bird had a yellow orbital ring around its black eye; that it often flicked its tail feathers outwards, in the manner of a wagtail *Motacilla*; and that the wings, when at rest, did not cross the back, but hung down at the sides of the tail. The amount of white showing on the wing when folded seemed to vary:



Plates 127 & 128. Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*, Worm's Head, West Glamorgan, 29th July 1978 (*Harold E. Grenfell*)

sometimes just odd specks were visible, and on other occasions we could see a definite but faint double wing-bar.

*PHILIP RAWNSLEY*



**Plate 129. Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*, Worm's Head, West Glamorgan, 29th July 1978 (Harold E. Grenfell)**

I returned home at Mumbles near Swansea late on 25th July 1978 to find that G. J. Rawnsley and Philip Rawnsley, birdwatchers from Yorkshire on holiday in the Gower Peninsula, West Glamorgan, had left a note for me claiming that they had seen a Northern Mockingbird at Worm's Head on 24th July. They had identified the species using American reference books in my library, to which my father had given them access.

On 27th July, S. Usher saw the same bird and took notes, but was unable to identify it. He telephoned D. O. Elias and described what he had seen. On the evening of 28th July, David Elias and I were able to visit The Worm (access had not been possible earlier, because of the tides). On the way, we met the Rawnsley brothers returning from the Head, and they told us that the bird was still there. We finally reached the patch of gorse scrub which they had described and were able to see the bird well and satisfy ourselves that it was indeed a Northern Mockingbird. I returned alone on the following evening and photographed it, approaching down to about 6 m (plates 126-129). The bird remained near the gorse on the Inner Head until at least 31st August 1978.

The following description is based on my own field notes and information sent to me by several other observers:

Brown-grey perching bird with long tail, reminiscent of large thrush *Turdus* or, in some views, a Great Grey Shrike. It was seen with Linnets, a family of Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus* and a pair of Blackbirds. It was twice as big as a Linnet and about 12 mm ( $\frac{1}{2}$  inch) longer than a Blackbird. The tail was approximately equal to the body length. The bill, rather fine in proportion to the head, was dark grey or black and the upper mandible was steeply curved at the tip, but not hooked as that of a shrike. The eye had a black pupil and pale yellow iris. The thin legs appeared very dark grey and the feet were those of a perching bird. It was not ringed. The forehead, crown, nape, mantle and rump were grey-brown (described as 'dark grey, recalling female Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*', by SU). The chin, throat, neck, breast and undertail were a much lighter brownish-cream or buff.

The upperwings and tail feathers were dark grey-brown except for some white spots or flecking visible on the secondary coverts. The wings, held loosely at the side of the body and tail, also showed evidence of a white wing-bar on the inner primaries. The tail, held horizontally or cocked upwards slightly (a posture reminding SU of a Magpie *Pica pica*), showed white outer feathers. A dark mark ran from the base of the bill around the eye, and a thin dark line extended vertically down the centre of the breast towards the belly. The crown was slightly domed. The darkest part of the folded wing was at the carpal joint and primaries. In flight, two white wing-bars were prominent on the primaries, which were fingered at the tips. The white outer tail feathers were also a feature when the tail was fanned.

The bird was active and, most often, rather confiding, frequently flying from favoured perches in the gorse to the short turf and back again. It fed from the ground and from gorse bushes, snatched at insects in the air and spent time hidden from sight inside the scrub. It pursued one of the Blackbirds occasionally and was itself mobbed by Linnets and by the Blackbirds. When perched, it flicked its tail frequently. When it took short, clumsy, rather low flights, it fanned its tail, and the white wing-bars were very conspicuous when it turned before alighting.

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Plates 130 & 131. Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*, Horsey Island, Essex, May 1988 (*Peter Loud*). (See pages 353-354)

### Northern Mockingbird in Cornwall

First seen at 07.30 GMT on 30th August 1982, flying down from a tall conifer from which it had been disturbed by a couple of Carrion Crows *Corvus corone*. It was about the size of a Blackbird, but with a slimmer body and a long tail, generally grey in colour, with whitish underparts and white wing patches. It called 'chack' a couple of times as it dropped into some small trees. In flight, it had broad rounded wings with large white wing flashes, white underparts, and a long narrow tail which from above was dark grey with white on the outer feathers, the white getting wider towards the distal third of the tail; below, the tail showed a lot more white than it did from above. The flight seemed slow. The bird settled in the lower part of an apple tree, about 1 m above the ground. I went on hands and knees to a small hedge and looked through, from which position I watched the bird at a range of about 4 m for four or five minutes.

When the bird was perched in the open on the lowest branch, I noted the following details:

<p>Head, back and wings grey, with two white wing-bars and a white patch below the longest wing-bar near the edge of the wing; primaries blackish-brown. Underparts a dirty-white with a bit of a greyish wash across the breast and</p>	<p>on the flanks. Undertail-coverts white. Legs dark grey to blackish; eye dull yellow with dark iris. Bill black. The bird was slim and did not seem to be particularly long.</p>
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When the bird flew off, being chased by Magpies, the wing pattern was very striking, with a large white wing patch and white wing-bars; the amount of white in the tail suggested that it was on at least two and perhaps three of the outer feathers. Finally, it called two or three times, a harsh 'chack' as it was blown away over Saltash town by the force 7-8 northwesterly gale, and was not seen again.

*E. GRIFFITHS*

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### Northern Mockingbird in Essex

On the early evening of 17th May 1988, I was telephoned at work by Malcolm Hutchings, who had been invited onto the privately owned Horsey Island, in Hamford Water, Essex, to try to identify a bird found earlier in the day by Joe Backhouse, who, with his mother, lived on and farmed the island. MH commented that it bore a superficial resemblance to one of the grey shrikes *Lanius*, but it was not a species with which he was familiar.

I had recently returned from Venezuela, where I had seen Tropical Mockingbird *Mimus gilvovs*, and it occurred to me, as I drove with my wife to the site, that a member of this genus was a distinct possibility. These thoughts were rapidly confirmed as we watched the bird for about 15 minutes before it disappeared prior to dusk. After checking relevant field guides, I was confident that it was, in fact, a Northern Mockingbird.

Other than by boat, Horsey Island is accessible only via a 1-km-long, and potentially dangerous, causeway for about 2½ hours either side of low tide. Very valuable arab horses are kept on the island and several scarce bird species breed there. JB was asked about allowing others onto the island to see the bird if it stayed, and he kindly agreed to a return visit with an absolute maximum of ten people. I therefore took a group of experienced Essex observers over on 21st

May, when the bird performed well for an hour, and it was seen for the last time on 23rd by two other observers, one of whom, Peter Loud, took several photographs (plates 130 & 131, see page 352).

Over seven years on, I still sense occasional resentment and disapproval that details of the bird's presence were 'suppressed', but a landowner must surely retain the right to decide who visits his land.

The following description of the bird was compiled from notes made during the two visits outlined above:

*Size and jizz* Between Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* and Magpie (both in vicinity) in size. When first relocated on 21st, passed off momentarily as Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*. Longish tail with rounded end and movements on ground somewhat reminiscent of large babbler *Turdoides*.

*Plumage* Crown, nape, mantle and rump grey. Narrow black loreal line. White supercilium generally indistinct and becoming extremely narrow over eye and for short distance to rear of it. Few faint dark streaks below eye, also narrow dark moustachial streaks just discernible at close range. White tips to median and greater coverts created double wing-bar, upper one narrower and broken. Base of greater coverts plus remiges black, though faint brownish tinge visible in some lights. Narrow, whitish fringes to tertials and impression of faint panel formed by abraded pale margins of secondaries. In flight,

extensive white on base of primaries created conspicuous white patches. Closed tail dark above with white edges. When spread, at least outer two feathers wholly white, remainder with white tips except for central pair, which were completely dark. Undertail white except for central dark area at tip. Underparts white and unmarked, breast slightly less pure white than throat and belly. Faintly creamy tinge to underparts in some lights.

*Bare parts* Bill dark, shorter than head length, with slight downward curvature of end of upper mandible. Legs dark grey.

*Habitat and behaviour* Spent much time on ground in grass field with horses and sheep, fairly frequently flying up to row of hawthorns *Crataegus* or to barbed-wire fence. Once chased off by a male Blackbird. Sometimes cocked tail; once sprang up from ground to catch an insect, like a large pipit *Anthus*. Not heard to call.

Northern Mockingbird originates from southern North America and Central America and was listed by Chandler S. Robbins (*Brit. Birds* 73: 448-457) as one of the Nearctic landbirds that might reach Britain. The Essex individual is the second fully accepted, Category A record on the British & Irish List, following the Cornish record in 1982 (above). Horsey Island is situated only 10 km from the port of Felixstowe, Suffolk, near to where there have been records of Lark Sparrow *Chondestes grammacus* from 30th June to 8th July 1981 (*Brit. Birds* 88: 395-400) and White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis* from 31st May to 8th June 1992 (*Brit. Birds* 86: 530-531). That the Northern Mockingbird's arrival had been ship-assisted is obviously a possibility.

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EDITORIAL COMMENT Rob Hume, Chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee, has commented: 'As there was no problem with the identification of these individuals, the only difficulty was deciding on their provenance, which became a matter for the BOURC.'

Dr David T. Parkin, Chairman of the BOURC, has commented as follows: 'A review of the literature and correspondence with North American ornithologists confirmed that Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos* is fairly sedentary over much of its range but is a short-distance migrant in the northern areas such as Quebec. It has been recorded on Sable Island over 40 times, and also on

Bermuda. Apparently, at migration stop-over points, it is typically outnumbered by both Grey Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis* and Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum*, and this imbalance is reflected in the observations of Durand (*Brit. Birds* 65: 436), who, on over 100 North Atlantic voyages during 1961-65, recorded both of these species, but no Northern Mockingbirds. Grey Catbird and Brown Thrasher have been recorded in Great Britain and Ireland once each, suggesting that Northern Mockingbird is a possible, but unlikely, vagrant.

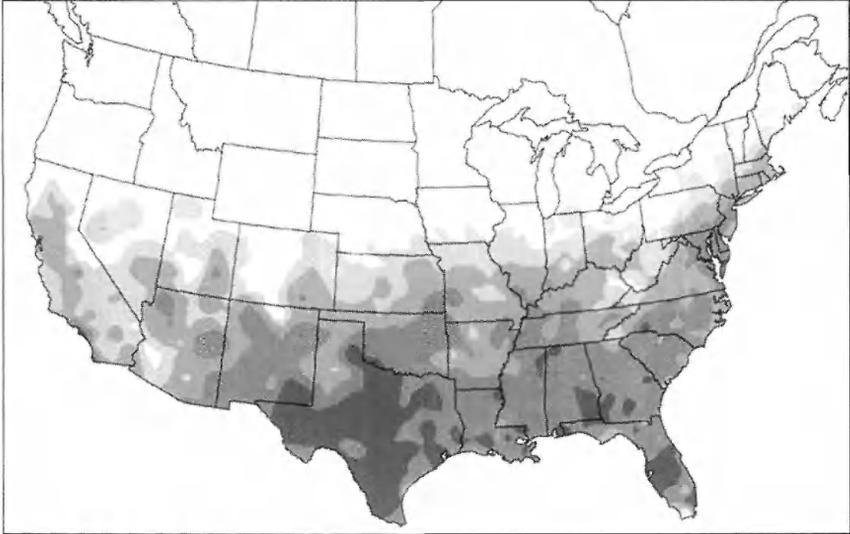


Fig. 1. Summer distribution of Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos* (reproduced by permission of Academic Press from Price, Droege & Price, 1995, *Summer Atlas of North American Birds*)

The status of Northern Mockingbird in captivity varied between 1970 and 1990. It was advertised for sale in *Cage & Aviary Birds* until 1979, but not subsequently (Tim Inskipp *in lit.*). Advertisements for “mockingbirds” in the 1980s and 1990s are believed to refer to South American species. Applications were made to the Department of the Environment to import Northern Mockingbirds in the early 1980s, but apparently were not utilised. Imports of North American species, mainly through Mexico, became much rarer after the September 1982 Mexican export ban came into force, although imports into Belgium and the Netherlands may have continued, and some North American breeding species still find their way into the European cage-bird trade.

The bird seen at Blakeney Point in August 1971 was described by one observer as “tail and wings heavily abraded, and the forehead had feathers missing forming a bald patch just above the bill”. To most members of the BOURC, this suggested a period of captivity. The species was known to be in trade at the time, and the presence of Yellow-billed Grosbeak *Eophona migratoria* and a glossy-starling *Lamprolaima* nearby did nothing to help the scenario. The bird was not admitted to any category.

The Northern Mockingbird at Worm’s Head in July-August 1978 caused long and heated argument around the Committee. No-one seemed to believe that the

bird had arrived under its own steam: the debate centred upon the relative likelihoods of assisted passage and escape. In favour of ship-assistance were location (Worm's Head projects into the sea and is clearly visible from boats arriving from the west) and habitat (if an escape from captivity, why should it fly past extensive suburban gardens around Swansea, and land on a relatively inhospitable headland?). Against were the date, which was very early for an American vagrant (although the earliest Sable Island bird was on 17th August) and availability in captivity at the time. The plumage details were not sufficient for racial identity to be determined, so this could not help. The Committee was split and, although there was a majority for Category A, this did not reach the required two-thirds. Under the rules of the Committee, the bird was assigned to Category D.

'By the time that the Saltash bird was found, the species had become much rarer in captivity. It was found on 30th August (which is a more typical date for transatlantic vagrants), on the day after a Black-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus erythrophthalmus* in the Isles of Scilly, two days before a Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia* in Cornwall, and six days before a Tennessee Warbler *Vermivora peregrina* in Orkney. Ship-assistance was recognised as a possible source, but this does not prevent the admittance of the record to Category A.

'The bird found at Hamford Water in May 1988 differed in being a spring record. Again, the proximity to the major container ports of Essex suggested ship-assistance, and more recent records of White-throated *Zonotrichia albicollis* and Lark Sparrows *Chondestes grammacus* in the area are consistent with this explanation. The bird was also admitted to Category A.

'On the strength of the Saltash and Hamford Water records, Northern Mockingbird was admitted to the British & Irish List (*Ibis* 135: 496).'



**Plate 132. Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum*, Durlston Head, Dorset, 23rd November 1966 (D. J. Godfrey).** Previously unpublished photograph of the first, and still the only, one to be recorded in Britain & Ireland (*Brit. Birds* 60: 323; 61: 349, 550-553).