

Rusty Blackbird: Moults and Ageing

Pamela Sinclair, Canadian Wildlife Service
Whitehorse, Yukon



Collaborators and Contributors:

Albert Creek and Teslin Migration Monitoring Stations:

Ted Murphy-Kelly

Jukka Jantunen

Jillian Johnston

Ben Schonewille

Canadian Wildlife Service:

Debbie van de Wetering

Nancy Hughes

Yukon Environment:

Cameron Eckert



Rusty Blackbirds breed throughout the Yukon in pristine wetlands



...but during fall migration they sometimes visit less natural habitats
Rusty Blackbirds feeding on spilled grain at a farm near Whitehorse, 14 Sept/05



The largest concentration of Rusty Blackbirds in the Whitehorse area in fall is at the landfill; 95% are juveniles.



Rusty Blackbirds feed on the garbage and compost and roost in the nearby trees and shrubs





What effect do these food sources have on Rusty Blackbirds?

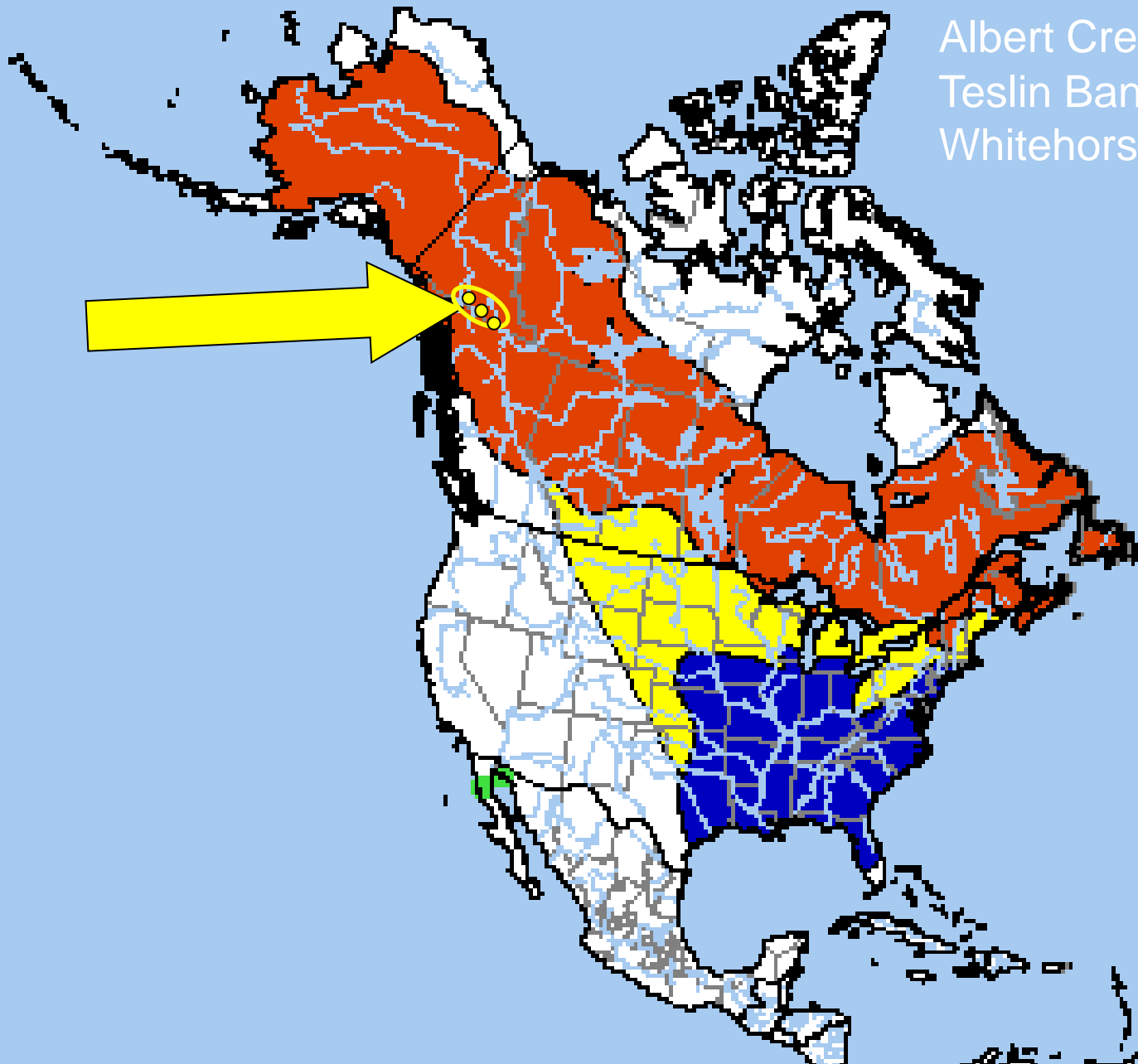


Yukon RUBL Banding Program:

Albert Creek Banding Station

Teslin Banding Station

Whitehorse Landfill



839 Rusty Blackbirds Banded - Yukon

	Spring	Fall
2005	57	49
2006	84	183
2007	16	235
2008	58	157



Rusty Blackbird Moults Schedule

- juvenal plumage June, July, early August
- single annual moult August/September, all ages
- “basic” (fall/winter) plumage complete in September
- feather edges wear off by spring, producing “alternate” (summer) plumage



Juvenal Plumage from fledging in mid-late June, to moult in August



female, 25 Aug/08



One annual moult in August/September



Basic Plumage fresh in September



female
4 Sept



male
1 Sept

Spring plumage is produced by feather wear



female, spring



male, spring

Age Determination: Distinguishing HY (Hatch Year) from AHY (After Hatch Year)



Age Determination: Distinguishing HY (Hatch Year) vs AHY (After Hatch Year)

- Skull Ossification (until late Sept/early Oct)
- Flight feather moult? No.
- Fault bars? No.
- Eye colour? some HY birds (until when?)
- Wear of feet and bill? (reliable?)
- plumage differences?
- moult limits? (males only?)



Skull Ossification

- reliable in fall while birds are in Yukon
- some HY birds almost completely ossified by mid-September
- birds in heavy moult difficult to see



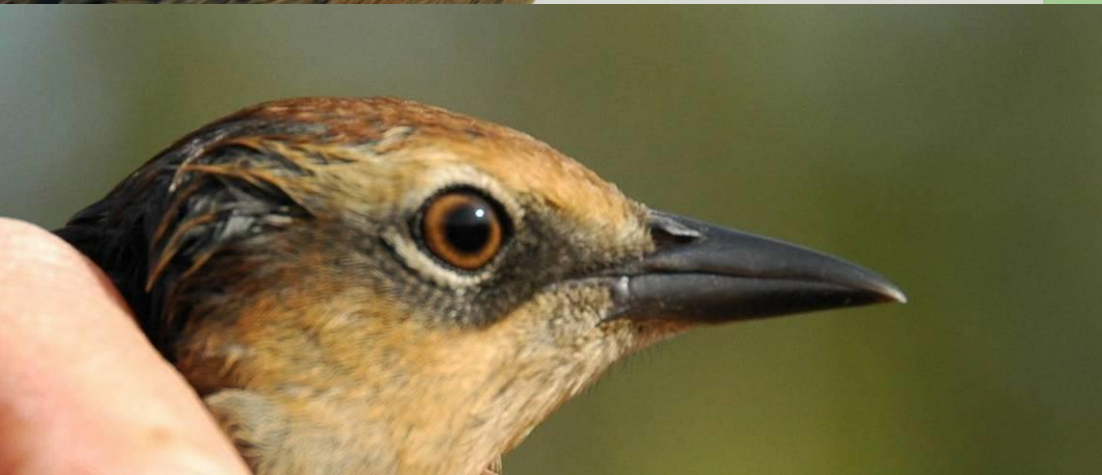
HY female



Eye colour: variable in fall



HY male with skull
<1/3 ossified



HY female with
skull almost
completely ossified



Eye colour

- adults have white eyes
- juvenile females have brown eyes for weeks/months
- juvenile males' eyes lighten quickly
- reliable for ageing birds with brown or dark yellow eyes
- birds with white eyes: age unknown
- most eyes white on wintering grounds



Wear of feet and bill



AHY male, September



HY male, September



Ageing by plumage



HY male

AHY male



Ageing by plumage

- Sexing straightforward: size, plumage
- Age differences not obvious
- Face: extent of black/grey in mask, and on throat
- Upperparts: no obvious differences, although buffy/rusty edges may (on average) be broader and more distinct on young birds



Ageing by plumage

HY female



Adult female



Plumage: Adult Males in September



Plumage: HY males in September



Plumage: Adult females in September



Plumage: HY females in September



Moult Limits in Underwing Coverts



Adult Male Underwing Coverts



HY Male Underwing Coverts



HY Male Underwing Coverts



↑↓ same bird



Adult Female Underwing Coverts



HY Female Underwing Coverts



Summary: Moults Limits

- look for contrast among the median underwing coverts
- Adult males: all median underwing coverts dark and shiny
- HY/SY males: most median underwing coverts are shiny and dark; some median coverts in middle of wing are dull
- requires good light
- should become more distinct over winter
- apparently reliable for males
- usually not visible in females?



Further Questions

- How long into the fall/winter do the plumage differences between HY and AHY birds persist?
 - *e.g. white eye ring and pale throat in HY birds*
- Which underwing coverts do HY birds moult, and when?



