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A Smooth-billed Ani returns from a successful foray hunting grasshoppers. (Photo 3)

CROSSWORD PUZZLE BIRD

The clue appears frequently in crossword puzzles: "Blackbird" for a three letter word. "Crow" is a four letter word; "grackle", "cowbird" and "starling" are even longer; "redwing" doesn't ever fit in the three letter space; "raven" doesn't work either; and I'm pretty sure the puzzle makers didn't have in mind the beautiful English "thrush" (six letters anyway) that has as its proper name Blackbird and looks like a black American Robin with a bright yellow bill, the ancient ingredient for "four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie." Birder that I am, the first time I encountered the crossword clue, Ani didn't come to mind until I filled in a couple of the letters by resolving clues going the opposite direction. Also interesting is the fact that neither of our Ani species is a blackbird, but both are actually members of the cuckoo family.

Preparing for our annual trek to the Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival in Titusville this year, I was excited to learn that both the Smooth-billed Ani and Groove-billed Ani had been recently seen in the festival area: the Smooth-billed at Viera, and the Groove-billed at Apopka. While the Smooth-billed was fairly easily found, and even bred, in southern Florida in the 1960s and '70s, it has become increasingly rare, and now virtually any sighting creates much excitement for birders.

The Grooved-billed has always been an extremely rare transient to south Florida, probably wandering over in the winter from south Texas, the nearest permanent breeding population. David Simpson, well known and highly regarded Florida tour guide, theorized that the Smooth-billed Ani population growth coincided with the establishment of the sugar industry in Florida after sugar was no longer available from Cuba. He further theorized that when the Everglades Agricultural Area changed its Best Management Practices in the 1980s, for the purpose of reducing nutrients in the water, herbicides were used to clear the canal banks of trees and shrubs instead of allowing them to remain natural. With these native canal "hedgerows" no longer available for roosting, foraging and nesting, the habitat was no longer hospitable for the Ani species and they began to disappear.

We arrived at the designated Ani spot at Viera shortly after 8 a.m. on Wednesday, the first day of the Festival, determined to find the Smooth-billed Ani. One group of about 20 was already there, and as we bided our time, watching and waiting, more groups and individuals came and went, including a tour bus from the Festival, until about noon, when we discovered we were the only ones still waiting. At exactly 1:38 p.m. the Smooth-billed Ani appeared and for the next 35 minutes alternately appeared briefly in and around two small Brazilian Pepper bushes (*photos 1 and 2*) and disappeared into the grass nearby, successfully searching for grasshoppers. (*photo 3*). We were the lone observers and watched the bird for a probable total of about 10 minutes that it was in sight until we left at 2:15 p.m. One down, one to go!

With specific directions to the Clay Island Trail in Apopka, we set out early Thursday morning and arrived at the trail head about 8:45 a.m., where we serendipitously met a park ranger re-filling the brochure bin at the trail kiosk. She gave us specific directions to the best place to observe the Groove-billed Anis, (yes, plural) which turned out to be a mile hike on a maintenance/bike/hiking trail along a canal overgrown (!) with trees and shrubs. Jewel walks faster than I do, so she called me on my phone to alert me that she already found them, but no hurry, as they were sitting and preening. (*photo 4*) Strangely, one did not have a tail. (*photo 5*), but the other



1



2

3 (top)



4



5

one was quite accommodating and posed prettily for its picture, affording a clear view of its distinctive grooved bill. (photo 6) It was when they flew that the absence of the tail gave the tailless bird a truly strange appearance, (photo 7) while conversely, the full-tailed flying Ani is spectacular. (photo 8)

David Simpson, who had seen both birds with full tails the previous week, again theorized that the long tail provides a false sense of body to a predator, (here probably a bobcat) which, while thinking it has caught lunch, ends up with a mouth full of tail feathers. Never fear, they will grow back. We returned to the car by 10:30 a.m., intending to drive the Apopka Wildlife Drive, only to discover it is only open Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. So we returned to the Festival, and birded the Merritt Island hot spots, which were pretty mundane after two exciting Ani species in two days.

Twice in the past several days the "Blackbird" clue has again appeared in crossword puzzles, as well as another bird clue that re-occurs frequently: "Sea eagle" which clue answer is either "ern" or "erne." Research has disclosed that this bird is not a Tern, nor does it occur in North America, so I will not need to find one to photograph. And luckily, all the bird crossword clues pertaining to extinct and flightless birds also will not require North American bird trips. So the two Ani species should be the end of our crossword puzzle bird searching.

How about a new bird search category, such as "birds seen while dreaming during sleep at night?" We have a friend who maintains just such a life list. Too esoteric? Yeah, probably. Let's end it with "Ani."

Smooth-billed Ani in Florida: www.sun-sentinel.com/local/palm-beach/fl-bird-disappears-20150924-story.html.

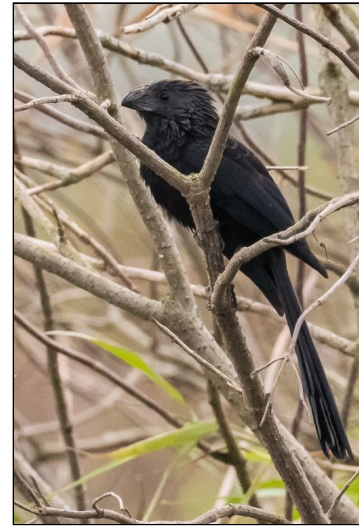
Groove-billed Ani: www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Groove-billed_Ani/id.

Common Blackbird: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_blackbird.

Crossword solver (31 answers!) for "blackbird": www.wordplays.com/crossword-solver/blackbird

Space Coast Birding Festival: www.spacecoastbirdingandwildlifefestival.org/

David Simpson's web site is: birdingwithdavidsimpson.com/.



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7



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