

FIRST RECORD OF BLUE-BLACK GRASSQUIT FOR THE UNITED STATES IN ARIZONA

LEVI PLUMMER, 5751 W. CORRINE DR., GLENDALE, AZ, 85304, LAPLUMMER15@GMAIL.COM

On the evening of 15 July 2023, I sighted a Blue-black Grassquit (*Volatinia jacarina*; Figure 1) along Ash Creek at Cluff Ranch Wildlife Area in Graham County, near Safford, Arizona. A species that ranges from Sonora, Mexico to Argentina, Blue-black Grassquit had never been documented north of the U.S.-Mexico border. This observation therefore represents a first record for the United States.

I initially discovered the male Blue-black Grassquit at about 5:15 pm when I accidentally flushed it from low in a patch of Johnson grass (*Sorghum halepense*) into a nearby velvet mesquite (*Neltuma velutina*). The initial view was fleeting and somewhat obstructed, but I noted a bunting-sized bird with overall dark-blue coloration. At first, I thought it was an Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*), but when I got an unobstructed view of the bird perched in the mesquite, I knew its plumage was far too dark to be that species. The field marks that I observed were consistent with a male Blue-black Grassquit: dark, bluish-black bunting-type passerine with brownish-edged primaries, gray upper mandible, horn-colored/grayish lower mandible, and grayish-flesh-colored legs. Small patches of white on the lesser underwing coverts were visible while perched and in flight (Figure 2). I was able to observe the bird from distances as close 2 m as it foraged on the ground almost at my feet. I made my observations of the bird using my Vortex Diamondback 8x42 binoculars.

After getting a good look at the grassquit perched and preening, I took photos and a video on my cell phone through my binoculars (I had left my camera in the car). I then went to my car, got my camera, and returned to get some better photos. I called other birders but they weren't convinced until I posted photos on the Arizona Rare Birds Discord group. I watched the bird as it foraged in the Johnson grass and occasionally perched in the mesquites. I obtained an audio recording of its flight call and enjoyed watching this stunning bird. Another birder who was in the area stopped by and enjoyed the bird for a while.

After a three-and-a-half-hour drive home to Phoenix, I submitted my eBird checklist with both photos and audio recording of the grassquit (Plummer, 2023). The camera photos were eagerly anticipated by many birders because the photo that I had originally posted to the Discord group didn't portray the coloration of the bare parts (legs, feet, and bill) accurately.



Figure 1. Blue-black Grassquit, Cluff Ranch Wildlife Area, Graham County, 15 July 2023. Photo by Levi Plummer



Figure 2. Small white shoulder tuft on this Blue-black Grassquit is usually concealed when bird perched, Cluff Ranch Wildlife Area, 16 July 2023. Photo by Dara Vazquez

Over the next 2 days, more than 75 birders observed and photographed the grassquit in the small clearing where it foraged on the ground and in the tall grasses, and often perched in the mesquite trees. This weedy clearing among the mesquites was only about 90 m long and 15 m wide. The Ash Creek riparian woodland corridor in Cluff Ranch Wildlife Area is adjacent to the foothills of the Pinaleño Mountains and runs northward to the Gila River. The vegetation in and around the grassquit's favored area included Fremont cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), velvet mesquite, Johnson grass, Thurber's pepperweed (*Lepidium thurberi*), fourwing saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*), bigbract verbena (*Verbena bracteata*), silverleaf nightshade (*Solanum elaeagnifolium*), and Coulter's horseweed (*Laennecia coulteri*). The elevation of this location is 939 m.

The grassquit's diet is mainly seeds, especially those of grasses (Rising 2020). I observed this as the grassquit mostly foraged on or near the ground, occasionally perching at the top of the Johnson grass. It then moved to the mesquites to perch, preen, and presumably roost. A few observers on the second morning (16 July) had unobstructed views of the bird perched at the top of a dead branch. When accidentally flushed it made ascending, slurred "seeeeep" flight calls. Strand (2023) later described well the other call that I observed, referring to it as a type of "spit" call.

Blue-black Grassquit is a common and widespread species occupying a variety of open habitats from weedy fields to second-growth woods throughout much of the Neotropics from Mexico south to northern Chile and northern Argentina (Rising 2020). While thought to be sedentary through most of its range, there is evidence of northward movement of the species in Sonora, Mexico during the summer monsoon season (eBird 2023). The highly seasonal nature of food availability in many parts of its range also suggest that some seasonal movements are made. The timing of this first Arizona record is an excellent representation of such a seasonal movement overshoot. Though provenance was initially questioned by several individuals, the bird showed no signs of abnormal (cage) feather wear, tameness, bands, or bill or feet deformities. This evidence, combined with the choice of habitat, remote location, behavior, and time of year all suggest natural, unassisted, origin.

The closest reports of this bird in Sonora, Mexico (eBird 2023) are from July 2023 as well, with one reported near Sahuaripa in central Sonora on 8 July, and 4 birds reported near Arizpe in northern Sonora on 13 July. The locations are about 250 km and 113 km from the Arizona-Mexico border, respectively.

I want to thank Doug Jenness for his helpful editing tips and patience throughout the process, and Dara Vazquez for providing one of the photos. I also valued and am thankful for the suggestions from the peer reviewers of the article, Roy May, Bill Lisowsky, and Richard Hoyer.

LITERATURE CITED

- eBird. 2023. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. [Accessed 4 March 2024]
- Plummer, L. 2023. eBird Checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S144688116>. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY. Available: <https://ebird.org>. (Accessed: 30 October 2023)
- Rising, J. D. 2020. Blue-black Grassquit (*Volatinia jacarina*), version 1.0. In del Hoyo, J., A. Elliott, J. Sargatal, D. A. Christie, and E. de Juana, editors. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, Available: <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.blbgra1.01>. (Accessed: 4 March 2024)
- Strand, C. 2023. eBird Checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S144770933>. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY. Available: <https://ebird.org>. (Accessed: 16 December 2023)