

## ART. 12. SYSTEMATIC NOTES ON NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS

3. The Northeastern Races of the Long-billed Marsh Wren  
(*Telmatodytes palustris*)BY KENNETH C. PARKES  
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This is the third of a series of papers on the systematics and nomenclature of certain North American birds. A general introduction and acknowledgments for the series as a whole will be found in the first paper (Parkes, 1955). In connection with the present paper I wish to add my thanks to Mr. Robie W. Tufts of Wolfville, Nova Scotia, through whose good offices I was able to examine two of the three known Nova Scotia specimens of Long-billed Marsh Wren (the third, in the National Museum of Canada, I have also seen). Most of the work on which the present paper is based was done in 1949.

The Long-billed Marsh Wren (*Telmatodytes palustris*) has a wide distribution in North America. Like the Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacuta*), it has both inland, fresh-water populations, and populations confined to narrow coastal strips. Unlike the Sharp-tailed Sparrow, the Marsh Wren's range reaches the Pacific coast as well as the Atlantic. This study is restricted to the tangled taxonomic and nomenclatorial history of the Long-billed Marsh Wrens in that portion of the species' range lying east of the Rocky Mountains and north of the mouth of Chesapeake Bay.

As of the fourth edition of the A.O.U. Check-list (1931), the birds of the area in question were divided as follows:

*Telmatodytes palustris palustris* (Wilson), Long-billed Marsh Wren.

*Telmatodytes palustris laingi* Harper, Alberta Marsh Wren.

*Telmatodytes palustris dissaëptus* (Bangs), Prairie Marsh Wren.

These vernacular names will be frequently used for convenience in the discussion beyond, since the usage of the subspecific names has been subjected to much shifting back and forth.

Todd (1937) claimed that Bangs' *dissaëptus* (type from Wayland, Massachusetts) was not available for the Prairie Marsh Wren, as he (Todd) was unable to separate Bangs' type series from a series Todd considered to represent typical *palustris*. The A.O.U. Check-list Committee apparently agreed with Todd, and in the Twentieth Check-list Supplement (Wetmore *et al.*, 1945, p. 446) the name for the Prairie Marsh Wren reverted to the next oldest available name, *iliacus* Ridgway (type from Wheatland, Indiana). Todd's 1937 paper was cited as authority for this change.

Todd had mentioned certain differences between the type specimen of *iliacus* and other specimens from neighboring localities, but attributed these differences to possible post-mortem color changes. Aldrich (1946, p. 131) claimed that the type specimen of *iliacus* represented a migrant of the Alberta subspecies known to that time as *laingi* Harper. Since the A.O.U. Check-list Committee agreed with Todd in 1945 that *dissaëptus* was a synonym of *palustris*, and (assuming Aldrich to have been correct about the identity of the type of *iliacus*) since the name *iliacus* applied properly to the Alberta Marsh Wren, it would appear that the Prairie Marsh Wren was without a name. Oddly enough, the A.O.U. Check-list Committee reversed



itself in the Twenty-third Supplement (Wetmore *et al.*, 1948, p. 441), citing Aldrich as authority for a change from *iliacus* back to *dissaëptus* for the Prairie Marsh Wren. Actually, Aldrich left the question open, confining himself merely to a reidentification of the type of *iliacus* as a side remark in the description of a new race from the far West. He made no mention of either the name *dissaëptus* or the population to which it had been applied. The A.O.U. committee gave no indication as to why they no longer agreed with Todd that *dissaëptus* should be considered a synonym of *palustris*.

As of the fifth edition of the A.O.U. Check-list (1957), therefore, the nomenclatorial *status quo* is as follows:

*Telmatodytes palustris palustris* (Wilson), Long-billed Marsh Wren.

*Telmatodytes palustris iliacus* Ridgway, Alberta Marsh Wren.

*Telmatodytes palustris dissaëptus* (Bangs), Prairie Marsh Wren.

Over two decades ago Welter (1935, p. 4) pointed out that the so-called Prairie Marsh Wren was actually a composite of two recognizable races, a western and an eastern, for which he used the names *iliacus* and *dissaëptus* respectively. His comments, which appear only in a brief foot-note in a general life-history paper, have been overlooked or ignored in subsequent years. Welter's diagnosis of the characters of the two alleged races appeared in more detail in his Ph.D. thesis (Welter, 1932), the taxonomic portion of which was never published. Only Oberholser (1938, p. 448), after Welter's paper appeared, recognized both *iliacus* and *dissaëptus* as distinct subspecies, and he may have come to this conclusion independently, since he does not quote Welter. Oberholser used the vernacular name Prairie Marsh Wren for the western *iliacus*, and called the eastern *dissaëptus* Massachusetts Marsh Wren.

There are three taxonomic points which obviously must be decided before the nomenclature of the northeastern Marsh Wrens can be straightened out. These questions may be listed as follows:

1. Was Todd correct in considering the type series of *dissaëptus* inseparable from *palustris*?
2. Was Aldrich correct in identifying the type specimen of *iliacus* as a migrant of *laingi*, the Alberta Marsh Wren?
3. Were Welter and Oberholser correct in believing that four rather than three races should be recognized in the area covered by this study?

The treatment in the fifth edition of the Check-list, as given above, requires that questions 1 and 3 be answered "no", and question 2 answered "yes".

Believing that, as with so many other seemingly complex taxonomic problems, the solution lay in assembling, *for once*, a really adequate series of specimens, I was able to bring together approximately 670 skins of *Telmatodytes palustris* representing only those northeastern populations under discussion here. Museums and individuals from whom specimens were borrowed are listed in the first paper of this series (Parkes, 1955).

The three questions listed above will be taken up one by one, and then a summary of the characters and distribution of the subspecies I recognize will follow.



### 1. The status of the name *dissaëptus* Bangs

Among the specimens examined during this study were two topotypes and a number of near-topotypes of *dissaëptus*. Comparison of this series with a near-topotypical series of *palustris* (vicinity of Philadelphia, Pa.) indicated that the Massachusetts birds were nearer the inland race as exemplified by specimens from central and western New York. There is some intermediacy toward *palustris*, but I feel that the relationships of the Massachusetts population to which Bangs applied the name *dissaëptus* are definitely with the inland form. Much of the earlier confusion, including Todd's rejection of *dissaëptus* as a synonym of *palustris*, can be traced to the use of specimens from the vicinity of the District of Columbia as typical of *palustris* when making comparisons. Unfortunately there are far fewer specimens of good *palustris* in museums than there are of these District of Columbia birds. The latter show much intergradation with *dissaëptus* and also with *waynei*, a race of the coastal marshes of southeastern Virginia and North Carolina which is outside the scope of the present paper. When topotypes of both *palustris* and *dissaëptus* are compared, as mentioned above, it becomes evident that the latter name is *not* a synonym of *palustris*, but is available for an inland race.

### 2. The status of the name *iliacus* Ridgway

I have examined the type specimen of *Telmatodytes palustris iliacus* Ridgway (U.S.N.M. 90199, from Wheatland, Indiana). It is most unfortunate that this particular specimen should have been chosen as a type, as it may or may not have been a migrant when collected (April 30, 1883). After careful comparison with excellent series of both populations to which this type has been assigned (the Prairie and Alberta Marsh Wrens), I have come to the conclusion that this specimen does *not* represent a migrant of the Alberta race. It is admittedly paler than the great majority of Prairie Marsh Wrens, but it is by no means as pale as *laingi*, nor are the black portions of the plumage suffused with light brown as in typical *laingi*. The specimen represents either a light-colored extreme or (as Mr. Todd believed) a foxed specimen of the Prairie Marsh Wren. Geographic evidence is even more pertinent; I have seen no migrant specimens of the Alberta Marsh Wren taken east of Oklahoma, and it is apparently uncommon even that far east. The chances of the Indiana-taken type of *iliacus* being an actual derivative of the Alberta population are, from the geographic standpoint, infinitesimal. The Alberta Marsh Wren thus reverts to its proper name of *Telmatodytes palustris laingi* Harper, as listed in the fourth edition (1931) of the A.O.U. Check-list.

With the earlier name *dissaëptus* available for the inland population that has been called Prairie Marsh Wren, the fate of the name *iliacus* depends on the answer to question 3.

### 3. The number of recognizable northeastern races

Examination of the excellent series of specimens assembled for this study convinced me that Welter and Oberholser were perfectly correct in their assertion that two subspecies are involved within the range described for *dissaëptus* in the fifth edition (1957) of the A.O.U. Check-list, making a



total of four within the area encompassed by this study. Names are available for all races (*palustris*, *dissaëptus*, *iliacus*, *laingi*), and no major change of concept of the names as used in the fourth edition (1931) of the A.O.U. Check-list is necessary other than the revival of *iliacus* Ridgway for the western component of the "Prairie Marsh Wren".

A summary of the characters and distribution of the four recognized races follows.

***Telmatodytes palustris palustris* (Wilson)**

*Certhia palustris* Wilson, American Ornithology, 2, 1807, p. 58 (borders of the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).

*Characters*: All browns, especially on sides of neck and flanks, more grayish or olivaceous, less reddish or buffy than in other races; browns of back and rump more variable, but show the same tendency. Crown the blackest of the four races, with the brown central stripe often reduced. When present, this crown stripe is almost always well defined, not diffuse. Lores white. Black and white interscapular region averaging somewhat more extensive, with broader white streaks. White superciliary stripe well marked, breaking up at posterior end into white dashes which tend to be continuous with white dashes of interscapular region. A brown collar seldom present between black of crown and of interscapular region. Throat and breast usually immaculate white. Slightly smaller and bill more slender than inland races (see measurements).

*Range*: Strictly a coastal form; all inland specimens I have examined from eastern United States north of the Florida peninsula are referable to *dissaëptus* or *iliacus* no matter how they were originally identified. This includes, for instance, such specimens as that from Berea, Kentucky (which I have examined), identified as *palustris* by Wetmore (1940, p. 549). Nominate *palustris* breeds, in general, in coastal and estuarine marshes from Rhode Island to Virginia. Intergrades with *dissaëptus* in Connecticut (presumably), the Hudson valley, western New Jersey, and southeastern Pennsylvania. Birds from Chesapeake Bay average nearest *palustris*; those from Washington, D.C., and adjacent parts of Virginia and Maryland are variously intermediate between *palustris* and *dissaëptus*, with some individuals showing an approach to *waynei*, the next race to the south along the coast. Intergradation with *waynei* manifests itself most conspicuously in the presence of barred upper tail coverts. Winters in much of its breeding range, and south through most of peninsular Florida. Accidental in Nova Scotia.

***Telmatodytes palustris dissäëptus* (Bangs)**

*Cistothorus* (*Telmatodytes*) *palustris dissäëptus* Bangs, Auk, 19, 1902, p. 352 (Wayland, Massachusetts).

*Characters*: All browns more reddish than those of *palustris*. Brown always present on crown, almost always diffuse, often covering almost all of crown, frequently extending backwards and laterally as a collar between black of crown and of interscapular region. Lores usually white, sometimes pale buffy. Black interscapular region averaging somewhat less extensive, white markings narrower than in *palustris*. Superciliary line often less pure white, less distinct. Postocular spot or line usually brown (black in *palustris*). Brown of sides averaging more extensive, especially anteriorly. Breast frequently washed with pale brown or orange brown.



*Range:* Breeds from southern New Brunswick, southern Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, southwestern Quebec and southern Ontario south to the mountains of western Virginia, eastern West Virginia, south-central Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Intergrades with *palustris* just inland from the coast from Rhode Island to Virginia, and with *iliacus* in central Michigan; undoubtedly also intergrades with *iliacus* in western Ohio, eastern Indiana, and south-central Ontario. Winters at least casually through most of the breeding range, south to the Gulf states from Mississippi eastward. Accidental in Nova Scotia.

***Telmatodytes palustris iliacus* Ridgway**

*Telmatodytes palustris iliacus* Ridgway, Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington, v. 16, 1903, p. 110 (Wheatland, Knox Co., Indiana).

*Characters:* All browns lighter and more reddish than in *dissaëptus*. Crown almost always more suffused with brown than in that race. Lores and anterior portion of superciliary line usually buffy, sometimes white. Ear covert region more rusty. Brown of crown tends to be more extensive posteriorly. Light markings of outer webs of secondaries and tertials more extensive, tending to be confluent in some specimens. Always at least slightly stained with rusty below, often most of the underparts so washed.

*Range:* Breeds from southwestern Michigan, western Indiana and western Ontario south to southern Illinois, Missouri and eastern Kansas, west through the Dakotas and Manitoba. Most Manitoba specimens are of this race; some from the western part of the province show the influence of *laingi*. As is also the case with *dissaëptus*, the type locality of *iliacus* is near the eastern periphery of the range of the subspecies, rather than near the center of differentiation. The characters of the race to which the name *iliacus* is being applied are shown to best advantage in specimens from the upper Mississippi drainage, particularly Minnesota and Wisconsin. This subspecies winters through much of southeastern United States, west at least to southeastern Texas. Like many other midwestern birds, *iliacus* has a southeast-northwest migration route, and may be found on migration within the breeding range of *dissaëptus*, and casually as far east as Long Island, New York, in the range of *palustris* (A.M.N.H. 66451, Montauk Point lighthouse, October 13, 1888).

***Telmatodytes palustris laingi* Harper**

*Telmatodytes palustris laingi* Harper, Occasional Papers of the Boston Society of Natural History, v. 5, 1926, p. 221 (Athabaska Delta, Main Branch [9 miles above mouth], Alberta, Canada).

*Characters:* A very distinctive race, with all browns paler and buffier than in *iliacus*. All black areas of other races, including interscapular region, are in *laingi* more or less invaded by browns. Under tail coverts immaculate or barred with pale rusty, never with black barring (*iliacus* almost always has at least a trace of black in the barring, which is often heavy). Differs from *plesius* and other western races in lacking bars on the upper tail coverts. Within the range here assigned to *laingi*, there is some geographic variation in size. Topotypes average slightly longer in wing and tail than any of the other races discussed here. Saskatchewan birds average somewhat smaller in these measurements. In the accompanying table, after the column giving



measurements of a composite series of male *laingi*, comparative wing and tail measurements are given for a small series each of male topotypes from Alberta and males from Stalwart and Last Mountain Lake, Saskatchewan. The only female *laingi* measured were from the latter series.

*Range*: Breeds east of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta. The breeding Marsh Wren of Montana east of the Rockies is probably this race (no specimens seen), and is so assigned by the A.O.U. Check-list (1957). Birds of all but easternmost Saskatchewan are closest to *laingi* in color, but may show some signs of approach to *iliacus*. Presumably intergrades with *plesius* along the east face of the Rocky Mountains; no breeding birds from this area seen, but winter and migrant specimens which appear to be *laingi-plesius* intergrades have been examined from New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico. Principal winter range apparently in Mexico; migrants examined from Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas.

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TABLE 1. MEASUREMENTS OF TELMATODYTES PALUSTRIS

	<i>palustris</i>	<i>dissaëptus</i>	<i>iliacus</i>	<i>laingi</i>	<i>laingi</i>	<i>laingi</i>
MALES	23	33	17	20	4 Alta.	8 Sask.
Wing (chord)	47.52 (49.8)	48.56.2 (51.8)	50.5-53.8 (51.9)	51.5-55 (53.1)	52.9-54.8 (53.7)	51.5-53.9 (52.4)
Tail	39.44.2 (41.8)	41.7-46.9 (44.6)	43.47.3 (45.2)	42.3-48 (45.2)	44.3-46.9 (46)	42.3-45 (43.4)
Bill from nostril	9.5-10.6 (10.1)	9.5-11.2 (10.3)	9.6-11 (10.1)	9-10.2 (9.5)		
Depth bill at base	2.8-3.1 (2.96)	3-3.7 (3.35)	3-3.7 (3.34)	3-3.5 (3.08)		
Bill depth/length	0.264-0.310 (0.289)	0.301-0.362 (0.326)	0.300-0.365 (0.332)	0.294-0.389 (0.329)		
FEMALES	14	10	12			3 Sask.
Wing (chord)	45.8-51.4 (47.6)	45.3-50.5 (47.9)	47.6-52 (49.4)			47.1-49.3 (48)
Tail	37.4-42.8 (39.7)	38.7-44.5 (42.2)	39.2-43.7 (41.9)			37.8-39.1 (38.3)
Bill from nostril	9.4-11 (10)	8.7-10.5 (9.7)	8.6-10.5 (9.6)			8.3-9.6 (8.8)
Depth bill at base	2.8-3.5 (3.09)	2.8-3.3 (3.06)	2.6-3.5 (3.01)			2.7-3 (2.80)
Bill depth/length	0.289-0.320 (0.305)	0.289-0.379 (0.321)	0.280-0.357 (0.316)			0.312-0.325 (0.317)



Parkes, Kenneth C. 1959. "Systematic notes on North American birds. 3. The Northeastern races of the Long-billed Marsh wren (*Telmatodytes palustris*).*" Annals of the Carnegie Museum* 35, 275–281. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.330870>.

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