



QUICK TAKES

BY PAUL J. BAICICH

Kirtland's Warblers Perhaps not as Demanding

Kirtland's warblers, those specialized central-Michigan breeders, may be less selective in their habitat requirements than was previously thought. This federally endangered species has done well recently, with nestings in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Wisconsin, and Ontario. In central Michigan, Kirtland's warblers nest in dense stands of jack pine more than 40 hectares in size. The pines are between 5 and 23 years



The red-vented bulbul population is flourishing in Houston, Texas.

Houston's Red-vented Bubluls

Over the past few years, several introduced species have moved from the limbo of exotics to the status of countable species in North American field guides. They include Egyptian goose, nanday parakeet, rosy-faced lovebird, and scaly-breasted munia (formerly called nutmeg manikin). The red-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) could be next. This species is not to be confused with the red-whiskered bulbul, found near Miami since the 1960s. The red-vented bulbul has a Houston, Texas, toehold.

Dr. Dan Brooks, of the Houston Museum of Natural Science, wrote of the red-vented bulbul in an article a year ago in *The Wilson Journal of Ornithology*. The species is a common native bird of open forests, second growth, and gardens from the Indian subcontinent eastward to Vietnam and southern China. Red-vented bulbuls have been observed in the Houston area since the mid-1990s. No one is sure how the birds got there, especially since the species is not common in aviculture. One convincing possibility is that they might have arrived on large cargo barges from southern Asia that docked in the Houston Ship Channel. Whatever their origin, the birds have spread in mostly residential gardens at almost 120 sites in the region, and most have been reported since 2010.

If you live in or are visiting Houston and would like to report on red-vented bulbuls (e.g., nesting, flocking, or feeding) contact Dr. Brooks at www.hmns.org/files/InvasiveBirds.doc.

How Hummingbirds Taste Sweets

Most vertebrates, including us, have three tasting genes: T1R1, T1R2, and T1R3. T1R2 is necessary to taste sweets. But the genomes of birds lack T1R2. So, how can hummingbirds, feeding on flowering nectar and at sweetened hummer feeders, taste these sweet liquids?

Last year, researchers led by Maude Baldwin of Harvard University and Yasuka Toda of University of Tokyo pursued that question in *Science* and particularly focused on Anna's hummingbirds. They reasoned that if hummingbirds had no T1R2, perhaps the other two genes, T1R1 and T1R3, normally attuned to other "savory" flavors, had combined, or "repurposed" to pick up the slack and detect sucrose, glucose, and fructose.

They were right. Indeed, the T1R1-T1R3 receptors in hummingbirds produced an exceptional response to sugars.

In fact, scientists are already pursuing the question with other nectar-loving birds—from honeyeaters to orioles—to see if they, too, have repurposed their tasting genes to favor sweetness.

Learn to Identify Local Birds First!

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BIRD WATCHER'S DIGEST

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