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THE DUNLIN IN OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN S. SHACKFORD

In bright breeding plumage the Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) is wholly unlike any other scolopacid known to visit Oklahoma, but in winter plumage it can be puzzling. It is not much smaller than the Pectoral Sandpiper (*C. melanotos*) and

DUNLINS

Photographed by John S. Shackford at Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma: lower, in full breeding plumage, on 11 May 1975; upper in winter plumage, between 11 and 16 October 1975.

not much larger than the Baird's Sandpiper (*C. bairdii*) and White-rumped Sandpiper (*C. fuscicollis*). It has about the same body size as the Stilt Sandpiper (*Micropalama himantopus*), but is much shorter-legged. During the period of southward migration, when it is likely to be in winter feather, its long, slender, slightly decurved bill is perhaps its best fieldmark. The species with which it is most likely to be confused at that season is the Western Sandpiper (*C. mauri*), females of which, though actually quite small, sometimes look large on chilly days, and their bills are longish, slender, and slightly decurved toward the tip. The Curlew Sandpiper (*C. ferruginea*), a mainly Old World bird that has been seen on three occasions on the coast of Texas (Oberholser, 1974, The bird life of Texas, Univ. Texas Press, Austin, 1: 351), resembles the Dunlin closely in winter. That species has a white rump patch at all seasons, however, and its bill is more strongly decurved throughout its whole length than that of the Dunlin.

The Dunlin was first recorded in Oklahoma on 3 September 1879 in Love County, in the south-central part of the state, by G. H. Ragsdale (Nice, 1931, Birds of Oklahoma, p. 94). It was recorded for the second time on 15 May 1924, when L. B. Nice collected one of five birds "in summer plumage" seen near Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma (Nice, *loc. cit.*). This specimen, a male (UOMZ old no. 3180), though somewhat "grease-burnt," is still in fair condition. On 26 and 28 May 1928, George B. Saunders saw Dunlins at Lake Overholser in Oklahoma City — four birds (one collected) on the 26th, two birds on the 28th (Nice, *loc. cit.*). On 16 May 1937, George M. Sutton saw two Dunlins in a mixed flock of shorebirds along the Cimarron River north of Gate, Beaver County, at the eastern end of the Panhandle. So much for early Oklahoma records spanning a 58-year period: the species was not reported between 1937 and 1950.

Since 1950, the Dunlin has been seen almost every year in the main body of the state—i.e., east of the 100th meridian. According to the summary of records on file at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, northward migration takes place from 27 April to 31 May, whereas southward migration begins 23 July and continues well into fall. Most late summer and fall sightings have been of one, two, or three birds, though on 7 September 1971, Dotty M. Goard saw a flock of about 20 at Young's Lake, near Dewey, Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma; on 21 October 1967, Robert B. Payne, Walter R. Quanstrom, *et al.* saw a flock of about 20, all in gray feather, at Lake Overholser; and on 16 and 17 November 1968, John G. Newell saw a flock of six birds at Lake Overholser. With one exception, records for the period between 24 November and 15 February have been of one bird, the exception being the two birds seen together repeatedly by John G. Newell, J. E. Martin, *et al.* from 15 to 29 December 1962, at Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City; that winter bad weather set in at the end of December and the two birds must have perished or moved on, for no one could find them on 1 January 1963 (1963, Audubon Field Notes, 17: 236, 340). The several winter records for the period between 15 December and 15 February indicate that *Calidris alpina* is a hardy bird.

In spring, large aggregations have been seen in the vicinity of Oklahoma City, notably the 39 birds counted by John G. Newell and Tom Shires on 25 May 1968 in a flooded field in Canadian County just west of Lake Overholser, and the 43 birds counted by Newell in the same area the following day (26 May).

Most Dunlin sightings in Oklahoma have been in Oklahoma, Canadian, and Tulsa counties, but there are records also for Sequoyah, Rogers, Washington, Osage, Bryan, Marshall, Love, Murray, Cleveland, Payne, Alfalfa, and Beaver counties. The fact that no sightings have been reported from southwestern Oklahoma and from the western nine-tenths of the Panhandle may be indicative of absence of observers rather than of Dunlins.

Like all "peeps," the Dunlin is gregarious while migrating. Shorebirds with which it has been observed to associate in Oklahoma include most of the species mentioned above, the Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*), and the American Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*). No one has reported seeing any sort of courtship behavior among Dunlins in Oklahoma, nor has anyone observed a Dunlin in juvenal plumage, a plumage to be looked for in the early part of the southward migration, and one characterized by small dark spotting throughout the breast and belly. A bird observed by O. W. Letson and his wife Ethel at Recreation Lake in Mohawk Park, Tulsa, on 5 and 6 September 1954 (1955, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 36: 83-84; 1955, Audubon Field Notes, 9: 37), was gray above but black on the belly—an example, it would seem, of abnormally delayed postnuptial molt.

10731 N. WESTERN, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73114, 15 MAY 1975.

FOOD HABITS OF THE COMMON MERGANSER IN WINTER

BY BERTIN W. ANDERSON AND MICHAEL G. REEDER

The Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*), a large duck especially adapted for catching fish, is abundant in late fall and winter on many Oklahoma reservoirs. At the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma, where we studied the species' winter food habits between November 1969 and March 1972, it was among the commonest of waterfowl. During the three winters we saw it chiefly on the main reservoir in the refuge and on a mile-long stretch of the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River below the reservoir dam (Anderson and Timken, 1972, J. Wildl. Mgmt., 36: 1127-33). We observed feeding behavior on 83 occasions ranging from one to eight hours in duration and collected 142 specimens. All food from the stomachs and esophagi of these we removed, weighed, and identified.

The gizzard shad (*Dorosoma cepedianum*) was by far the commonest food item, though some sunfish (*Lepomis* sp.) were caught (Table I). Common Mergansers are opportunistic feeders, hence they prey on whatever is most readily

Table I

Stomach and esophageal contents of 142 Common Mergansers collected at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma

Food Item	No. of Fish	% of Total No. of Fish	Weight in Grams	% of Total Weight
Dorosoma cepedianum	105	95	1,146	97
Lepomis sp.	2	2	25	2
Unidentified fish	3	3	7	1
Totals	110	100	1,178	100

obtainable. Occasionally they catch a game fish, but they do not seem to seek such species out—a statement that probably applies to the whole of the bird's extensive winter range. In the Northern Great Plains, 87% of identified fish remains found in Common Mergansers were of rough or forage species (Timken and Anderson, 1969, J. Wildl. Mgmt., 33: 87-91).

When the air temperature at our study area dropped to 10°F. or lower, the moving, heavily saline water below the reservoir dam did not freeze, and large concentrations of shad gathered in the deeper pockets. Here many shad that were dead or swimming about in a disoriented manner near the surface provided a good food supply for such fish-eating birds as Common Goldeneyes (*Bucephala clangula*), Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*), and Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), as well as for the mergansers.

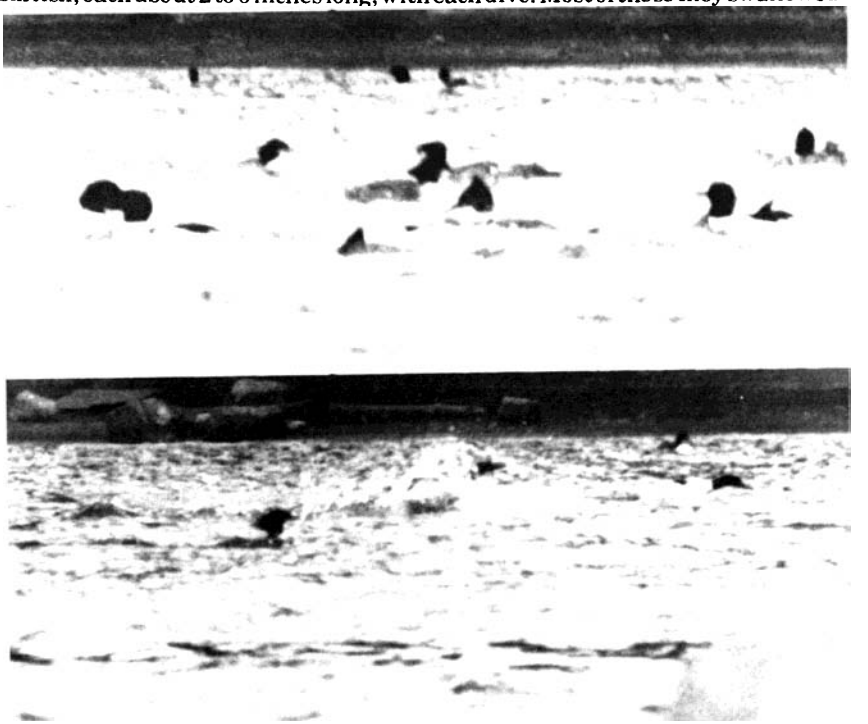
During the first and third winters we observed large numbers of mergansers (up to 500 on one occasion) feeding below the dam. In the second winter, however, we saw few mergansers there despite the fact that dead and floundering shad were more numerous along that stretch than they were in the first winter or the third. The second winter was the only one in which we saw large numbers of dead and floundering shad in the reservoir itself, so we deduced that when food was readily available there the mergansers preferred the reservoir to the relatively confined feeding spot below the dam. When there were few shad in the reservoir, the mergansers congregated below the dam, where the fish were numerous and concentrated.

The mergansers spent the night on the reservoir. Usually they fed twice a day: shortly after dawn and shortly before sunset (Anderson, Reeder, and Timken, 1974, Condor, 76: 472-76). The favored feeding spot on the river was immediately below the spillway. When intent on feeding just below the dam, the birds usually alighted not there, but 50 to 100 feet downstream from it, where they swam about with heads up. If some birds already had alighted, incoming flocks settled readily. If cars or people moved about along the shore, all the birds

usually flew up, but parked cars and people lying or sitting motionless seemed to bother them very little. If undisturbed, they moved upstream soon after alighting. As they approached their favorite feeding place many of them put their heads under water (see photo). We frequently observed this behavior and were convinced that the mergansers were looking for fish.

If incoming birds found others already feeding just below the spillway, they moved upstream rapidly soon after alighting, as if afraid that all the food would be gone before they got there. "Standing up" in the water, they "ran" forward, keeping their wings folded when making short runs, but flailing the surface with their wings if making a long run.

On reaching the favored feeding spot, they dived repeatedly, catching two to six fish, each about 2 to 6 inches long, with each dive. Most of these they swallowed



COMMON MERGANSERS FEEDING

Photographed by Bertin W. Anderson on the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River just below the Salt Plains Reservoir dam in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma. In upper picture drake at front center, with head under water, is looking for fish; in lower picture two drakes are "running" on the water, one (at right) with wings pressed close to sides, the other with wings flailing the surface.

after returning to the surface. After consuming all they wanted, they floated or flew downstream where, standing in shallow water or on a low mudbank, they rested. On mild days they often flew back to the reservoir after a short rest, but on cold days they lingered along the river, sometimes for several hours. In bad weather the afternoon feeding period sometimes started as early as 1400 and it seemed to us that the birds moved back and forth more often than usual, as if requiring more food when circumstances were adverse. Proof of this would, of course, require marking birds and watching them.

If mergansers feeding below the spillway were disturbed while feeding, they usually flew back to the reservoir for a short time, then returned to the favored feeding spot.

529 NORTH BROADWAY, BLYTHE, CALIFORNIA 92225; ROUTE 2, VERMILLION, SOUTH DAKOTA 57069. 18 AUGUST 1975.

GENERAL NOTES

Birds killed at a TV tower near Coweta, Oklahoma in the fall of 1976.—In the fall of 1976 personnel at the KUTL TV tower 2 miles north of Coweta, Wagoner County, northeastern Oklahoma, telephoned me whenever they saw dead birds under the tower. As a result of their calls I visited the tower several times between 1 September and 30 October. The birds that I found did not differ greatly from those found there in the fall of 1974 (Norman, 1975, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 8: 25-27) and 1975 (Norman, 1976, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 9: 20), the most noteworthy of them being two Yellow Rails (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) picked up on 27 September and 3 October and a Bay-breasted Warbler (*Dendroica castanea*) picked up on 27 September. On the two rail specimens I have reported briefly (1976, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 9: 33). The weather was in no way exceptional throughout the period, a surprising fact related to it being that a cold front in mid-October was not accompanied by a heavy kill at the tower.

On 1 September I found only one bird, a Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*). On 14 September I again found only one bird, this time a Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*). Between 14 and 20 September (exact date or dates not recorded), four birds were picked up for me — a Sora Rail (*Porzana carolina*), 2 Carolina Wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*), and a parulid or vireonid whose mangled remains were unidentifiable. The plumage of this specimen's upperparts was olive in tone; but the bill-remains were not by any means flat enough or wide enough for a small flycatcher of the genus *Empidonax*.

In Table I (which see) the total of 24 birds shown as having been picked up by me on 20 September includes the four just mentioned (each indicated in the table by an asterisk). Notable among these are the two Carolina Wrens, a species believed to be strictly non-migratory in Oklahoma, if not throughout its range. Quite possibly these wrens killed themselves not at night but while chasing each other recklessly during daylight or twilight hours.

The fact that the Philadelphia Vireo (*Vireo philadelphicus*) was found on four dates in 1976 as well as on several dates in 1974 and 1975 suggests that this bird migrates through Oklahoma in considerable numbers. It is to be looked for from 20 September to 15 October (see Table I) and in spring from 28 April to 18 May (Sutton, 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 34). The Bay-breasted Warbler found on 27 September (male in first

Table I

Birds Found Dead Under TV Tower in Northeastern Oklahoma, Fall of 1976

Species	September						October						
	1	14	20	27	28	30	3	7	9	15	26	27	30
Pied-billed Grebe (Podilymbus podiceps)	1												
Ring-necked Duck (Aythya collaris)										1			
Sora (Porzana carolina)			1*		1		1		1		2		
Yellow Rail (Coturnicops noveboracensis)				1			1						
American Coot (Fulica americana)								1					
Mourning Dove (Zenaida macroura)						1							1
Yellow-billed Cuckoo (Coccyzus americanus)			3										
Common Nighthawk (Chordeiles minor)								1					
Common Flicker (Colaptes auratus)			2										
Red-headed Woodpecker (Melanerpes erythrocephalus)						1					2		
Brown Creeper (Certhia familiaris)											1	1	
House Wren (Troglodytes aedon)			1	1	1				1				
Winter Wren (Troglodytes troglodytes)											1	1	
Carolina Wren (Thryothorus ludovicianus)			2*										
Long-billed Marsh Wren (Cistothorus palustris)				1	1				1				
Short-billed Marsh Wren (Cistothorus platensis)					1								
Gray Catbird (Dumetella carolinensis)			4	5	2	3							
Brown Thrasher (Toxostoma rufum)				1		3	1						
Swainson's Thrush (Catharus ustulatus)					1	1	1						
Golden-crowned Kinglet (Regulus satrapa)											3		
Ruby-crowned Kinglet (Regulus calendula)						1					8	7	
White-eyed Vireo (Vireo griseus)			1										
Solitary Vireo (Vireo solitarius)			1		1								
Red-eyed Vireo (Vireo olivaceus)		1	3	2	2	2				2			
Philadelphia Vireo (Vireo philadelphicus)			1	1	4					1			
small vireonid or parulid			1*										
Black-and-white Warbler (Mniotilta varia)				2	2								
Orange-crowned Warbler (Vermivora celata)											3	1	
Nashville Warbler (Vermivora ruficapilla)				1					2	2	1		
Yellow-rumped Warbler (Dendroica coronata)											7	2	
Chestnut-sided Warbler (Dendroica pensylvanica)			1										
Bay-breasted Warbler (Dendroica castanea)				1									
Ovenbird (Seiurus aurocapillus)					1								
Mourning Warbler (Oporornis philadelphia)					1								
Common Yellowthroat (Geothlypis trichas)									1				
Wilson's Warbler (Wilsonia pusilla)									1				
American Redstart (Setophaga ruticilla)					1								
Bobolink (Dolichonyx oryzivorus)			1										
Western Meadowlark (Sturnella neglecta)												1	
Northern Oriole (Icterus galbula)			1										
Savannah Sparrow (Passerculus sandwichensis)											7		
Grasshopper Sparrow (Ammodramus savannarum)			1										
Le Conte's Sparrow (Ammospiza leconteii)										1	8	1	
Dark-eyed Junco (Junco hyemalis)											4		
Chipping Sparrow (Spizella passerina)											1		
White-crowned Sparrow (Zonotrichia leucophrys)											1		
White-throated Sparrow (Zonotrichia albicollis)											3		
Lincoln's Sparrow (Melospiza lincolnii)										1			
Swamp Sparrow (Melospiza georgiana)						1					3		
Song Sparrow (Melospiza melodia)											1		

*Picked up between 14 and 20 September.

winter feather, UOMZ 11307) is the first fall specimen of its species for the state and it represents the third fall record to be reported, the other two being (1) for 8 September 1973, when George M. Sutton saw an immature bird at Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, and (2) for 14 December 1974, when Warren D. Harden, J. Richard Gilliland, and George M. Sutton saw an immature bird at Norman (1975, Amer. Birds, 29: 172, 476). The two specimens of Common Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) were both "yellow-shafted"; the nine Yellow-rumped Warblers (*Dendroica coronata*) were all of the white-throated "Myrtle" form, though not necessarily of the eastern race of that form.

A glance at the table clearly shows how species that regularly winter in Oklahoma — e.g., the Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*), Yellow-rumped Warbler, Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*), White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*), and Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*)—tend to arrive from the north after such transients as the Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*) have passed through.—James L. Norman, *502 N. 14th St., Muskogee, Oklahoma 74401, 30 November 1976.*

Late spring sightings of Western Grebe in Oklahoma.—From 18 to 26 May 1974, I saw a Western Grebe (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) repeatedly at Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma. On 18 May I was able to approach it to within about 100 yards several times and saw it clearly through my binocular. The dates are late for migration northward. According to records on file at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, the only other May sightings for the state are of a single bird seen on 10 May 1970 by W. D. Harden and his wife Mary Ann at Draper Lake near Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, and of two birds seen repeatedly from 9 to 13 May 1973 by W. A. Carter, J. D. Tyler, W. D. Harden, Deloris Isted, *et al.* at Lake Etling, Black Mesa State Park, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma. Only four sightings are on record for April (Ponca City; Lake Altus; Lake Murray; Salt Fork of Arkansas River below Salt Plains Reservoir dam); the several winter records (21 December to 2 February) are for the following counties: Wagoner (3), Tulsa (1), Oklahoma (2), Cleveland (1), Stephens (1), Woodward (1).—J. G. Newell, *4129 N. Everest, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73111, 11 January 1977.*

Long-billed Dowitcher in Caddo County, Oklahoma in winter.—At about 0930 on 2 January 1976, while sitting with Douglas and Rodney Kemper in a duck blind at the north end of Lake Ellsworth, 1½ miles south of Apache in Caddo County, southwestern Oklahoma, I observed a close-knit flock of 12 Long-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) that were feeding near a mud bar about 80 yards south of us. Through my 8-power binocular I clearly saw the birds' dark legs and very long, straight bills. Several Killdeers (*Charadrius vociferus*) near them were small by comparison. The dowitchers were wading in water an inch or so deep; as they probed in the soft mud their heads went partly under. The sky was somewhat overcast; a 10-15 mph north wind was blowing; the air temperature was 30° F.

Average daily temperature during the last two weeks of December 1975 had been 38° F.; indeed, the whole fall and early winter had been unseasonably mild. The temperature high on 1 January had been 57° F., but a cold front had swept through the area that evening, bringing light snow flurries which lasted until 0900 on 2 January. The dowitchers probably arrived just ahead of this cold front.

According to Sutton (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 16), *Limnodromus scolopaceus* has not heretofore been recorded in Oklahoma in winter, though it has been seen in the fall as late as 18 December and in spring as early as 21 February.—Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73501, 16 January 1976.*