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A PURPLE SANDPIPER IN OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN S. SHACKFORD

In mid-afternoon on 9 December 1977, at the north end of Lake Overholser in Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, I happened upon a dark, medium-sized sandpiper that puzzled me. It was feeding with several Killdeers (*Charadrius vociferus*) and Least Sandpipers (*Calidris minutilla*) among low sandy islets well out from the shore. The lake was being filled by the Oklahoma City Water Resources Department at the time, so the sandy islands were gradually disappearing. The puzzling sandpiper was a bit smaller and shorter-legged than the Killdeers and noticeably larger than the Least Sandpipers. In shape and actions it reminded me strongly of a Red Knot (*C. canutus*), though it seemed small for that species. The air temperature was about 25°F. at the time of the sighting, but it had dropped to 8°F. during the preceding night. The lake as



PURPLE SANDPIPER

Photographed on 11 December 1977 by John S. Shackford at the north end of Lake Overholser in Oklahoma City. The impoundment's coffer dam shows at lower right.

a whole had not frozen over, but ice was forming along the shore. Since I was not dressed for wading, I did not get close to the bird, though I had fair looks at it through my binocular.

Returning an hour later with waterproof footgear and camera, I was able to observe the sandpiper much more closely. It was dark ashy gray on the head, neck, breast, and upperparts and white on the belly. Its orange legs and incomplete white eye-ring were noticeable. Orange at the base of its bill was less bright than that of its legs. The gray of its upperparts had a purple tone at times. When it flew it uttered callnotes that sounded like *whit* and *whit-whit*. Its spread wings showed much white, but its rump, upper tail coverts, and tail were all dark. After following the bird about and photographing it several times, I decided that it could be no other species than a Purple Sandpiper (*C. maritima*), a bird that had never been recorded in Oklahoma.

Later that afternoon (1700), Henry Walter and I returned to the stretch of shore along which I had seen the sandpiper, this time with a 15-60X telescope, found the bird without difficulty, and checked all fieldmarks carefully.

On 10 December, John G. Newell and Hubert Harris became the third and fourth persons to see the unfamiliar bird. Later that day several other members of the Oklahoma City Audubon Society as well as Deloris Isted of Cushing, Oklahoma, and Gary M. Lee and his wife, Ellen, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, all saw it. By this time the rising water level had greatly reduced the size of the sandy islets, and the sandpiper was feeding along the shore proper. To everyone's surprise it was quite approachable. Observers were able at times to get to within 8 or 10 feet. Occasionally it stood in water so deep that its legs were not visible, but I did not see it swim. Several color photographs that W. S. Isaacs and I took turned out well.

On 11 December several enthusiastic bird students from Tulsa, including Eleanor Sieg, Kenneth Hayes, and his wife Elizabeth, saw it. The sandy islets had disappeared. But now, after several days of cold weather, a broad rim of ice extended well out from shore in most places. The sandpiper spent much time upon the frozen rim picking at organic debris that it found there. Jack S. Roberts made color photographs and motion pictures of this activity. Later, when the bird had flown to the shore, I took several more photographs, this time in black-and-white. Roberts and I were often within 10 yards of the bird.

On 12 December the lake was so full that water was no longer being released into it. Also the ice was quickly disappearing. Warmer weather was melting it and waves created by a strong south wind were breaking it up. About 1100 I peered over the edge of a retaining wall and saw, almost directly below me, the Purple Sandpiper. It was standing upon the mass of floating driftwood that had accumulated in a corner formed by the retaining wall and coffer dam. I retreated almost immediately, fearful that further harassment might drive the bird completely away from Lake Overholser.

On 13 and 14 December I was unable to look for the bird, and so far as I know no one saw it on those dates. On 15 December I failed to find it. I also failed to find any Least Sandpipers, though scattered Killdeers were feeding among debris and at muddy spots near the coffer dam.

Calidris maritima breeds northward to high latitudes in eastern North America and western Eurasia and does not, as a rule, move far south of its breeding grounds in winter. In the North American continental interior it is decidedly uncommon. There are scattered records for the Great Lakes, a very few for the Great Plains, and none, so far as I know, for New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. For Missouri there are two, both doubtful: according to Widmann (1907, A preliminary catalog of the birds of Missouri, St. Louis, p. 67), the Purple Sandpiper was on P. R. Hoy's "list of birds taken in western Missouri in the spring of 1854"; the "between April 16 and May 31, 1854" record for Boonville, north-central Missouri mentioned by Bent (1927, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 142: 152) may well be of the same bird. The only record for Arkansas is of a single bird seen along the Mississippi River in Crittenden County, northeastern Arkansas, on 29 and 30 November 1976 (1977, Amer. Birds, 31: 341). Of the dozen or so Texas records, most are for jetties or sea-walls in the vicinity of Galveston and Freeport, but two "unsubstantiated sightings" are for areas well inland: on 23 April 1954, B. B. Watson saw a Purple Sandpiper at Lake Tyler in Smith County, northeastern Texas, and on 29 March 1955, Violet Hamilton saw one at Lake Dallas in Denton County, north-central Texas (Overholser, 1974, The birdlife of Texas, Univ. Texas Press, Austin, 1: 345). These lakes are about 70 and 90 miles, respectively, south of Oklahoma.

The Purple Sandpiper is not entirely the saltwater bird that its scientific name, *maritima* (=maritime), implies. Its breeding habitat, as described by Godfrey (1966, Natl. Mus. Canada Bull. 203: 150), is "moss and lichen tundra, often at considerable elevations and sometimes far inland . . ." In the six-volume work, "Birds of the Soviet Union" (Dement'ev *et al.*, 1969, 3: 187-88), are references to the species' freshwater breeding habitat in the Old World: in 1934 Demme reported populations that nested on Hooker Island, in the Franz Josef Archipelago on "plateau . . . amid large stone fragments near streams and small coastal brooks"; an unnamed source stated that "birds nesting far from sea" apparently were feeding on aquatic annelids (worms) and midge larvae; in 1938 Antipin reported that young birds observed on Novaya Zemlya, although hatched in the "shore zone," moved to "coastal heights, where they keep near brooks." Thus for breeding populations a freshwater habitat appears to be the norm.

After the breeding season the norm for virtually all populations is a salt-water habitat. There are, however, many freshwater records for the non-breeding season, some extending over several weeks. For example, at Niagara Falls, along the U.S.-Canadian border, during the winter of 1974-75, eight

Purple Sandpipers were seen in December and four in January (1975, Amer. Birds, 29: 689).

A significant winter problem is, of course, ice, for ice makes animal food virtually unobtainable. Partly because freshwater freezes at a higher temperature than saltwater, ice usually forms more readily inland than along ocean coasts. During recent winters in the Great Lakes region small, but recurring, numbers of Purple Sandpipers have been reported from points along the 700-mile stretch of freshwater between the south end of Lake Erie and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. If winter and ice force these birds to leave this stretch, they are obliged to fly southward across the great land mass. Under conditions of extreme privation such as these, some birds reach areas that are far indeed from the ocean.

Other species that irregularly appear in Oklahoma may also be victimized by what I have come to think of as *the St. Lawrence shunt*. Among these are the Oldsquaw (*Clangula hyemalis*), Red Knot, Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*), Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*), Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), and Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*).

10731 N. WESTERN, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73114, 4 FEBRUARY 1978.

A BALD EAGLE NEST ON THE R. S. KERR RESERVOIR

BY JOHN CARMICHAEL

Considerable attention has recently been paid to the ecology of Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) that winter in Oklahoma (Lish and Lewis, 1975, Proc. 29th Ann. Confer. Southeastern Assn. Game & Fish Commissioners, pp. 415-23). Data filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range make clear that the species' stay in the state is from early October through the first half of April as a rule, though there are many late-April sightings for northern Oklahoma; an adult bird was seen near Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma, on 8 May 1967; and Lish (1973, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 6: 30) has reported seven sightings, each of an immature bird, in Ottawa County, northeastern Oklahoma, during the 1-11 May period 1969-1971. According to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 117), two adult Bald Eagles summered at Upper Spavinaw Lake in Delaware County, northeastern Oklahoma, in 1950, and that same (or possibly an earlier) year a pair built a nest in the top of a huge sycamore on the west side of Fort Gibson Reservoir in Wagoner County, northeastern Oklahoma, "but no young were reared." As a Park Ranger assigned to the Robert S. Kerr Reservoir, in east-central Oklahoma, I have become accustomed to seeing Bald Eagles about the big impoundment in winter, but in the spring of 1976 one pair surprised me by lingering at least until 10 May. This pair had a nest along Sans Bois Creek in east-central Haskell County about 2 miles west of the town of Keota.

Ranger Larry Fears and I first became aware of the nest on 23 April. It was in the top of a dead tree along the north edge of an extensive stand of inundated timber. The water there was 2-5 feet deep. So long had the trees been dead that they had lost most of their branches. To the best of our knowledge no one had witnessed the building of the nest. It was so huge that we could not help surmising that eagles, or possibly Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*), had built it. We decided to check it whenever we were in the area, to see if it was being used.

The next time I was in the area was on 30 April. That morning, to my great delight, I found two adult Bald Eagles at the nest, one perched on the rim, the other "sitting down" in it, with head clearly showing over the rim. That afternoon Ranger Wayne Lea went to the nest with me. This time the one eagle that was there was in the nest: all we could see of it was its head.

The following day (1 May), Lea and I visited the nest-tree by boat. As we approached, we saw no eagle anywhere; but as we slowly paddled around we perceived that an eagle was deep in the nest, watching our every move. It did not seem to be disturbed and it made no attempt to leave. The tree was about 40 feet high. The nest appeared to be at least 3 feet in diameter and 2 feet thick.

Not wanting to disturb the bird, we carefully backed the boat away and hid ourselves among fallen trees and branches. The eagle watched as we ma-



BALD EAGLE ON NEST

Photographed on 1 May 1976 along San Bois Creek in Haskell County, Oklahoma, by John Carmichael and Wayne Lea.

neuvered the boat about. At one point Lea slipped from a log into the lake, causing quite a commotion, but the eagle seemed quite unperturbed. Its "sit tight" behavior convinced us that eggs, or possibly small chicks, were in the nest. We stayed close to the nest-tree about an hour. Before leaving we spotted the other eagle, perched in a dead tree some 200 yards south of the nest.

To keep from annoying the eagles, we decided to do all our observing from the bridge crossing Sans Bois Creek on State Highway 9. The bridge was about a quarter of a mile from the nest. From 2 to 10 May (inclusive) some member of the Reservoir Ranger Staff checked the nest at least once a day except on 3 May. On 4, 6, and 7 May, the only eagle that we saw was *in* the nest, thus reinforcing our belief that eggs or young were being brooded. On 5 and 9 May, no one saw an eagle either on or near the nest. On 10 May the one bird that we saw was perched in the top of a dead tree near the channel of Sans Bois Creek several hundred yards from the nest. We continued surveillance of the nest for another week, on some days checking it three times from the bridge, before becoming convinced that the eagles had abandoned it.

Sorely disappointed, we turned our attention to the circumstances that might have caused the eagles to leave. We decided that inclement weather had been a major factor. Several fronts had brought strong wind and heavy rain during the first week of May. On 3 June this decision of ours was confirmed: that day a party of navigation channel inspectors took a scheduled helicopter flight over the area, and Curt Weddle, the navigation system's Resident Engineer, arranged for Wayne Lea, Robert Berger (a biologist from the Tulsa District Office), and myself to be aboard. The helicopter made its first pass above and to the north of the nest-tree. There were no eggs or chicks in the nest. On a second approach, this from the south side, we saw that a main supporting branch on that side had fallen off. The south side of the nest had collapsed, spilling much of the lining over the rim. We made several more turns about the nest and took photographs of it before leaving the area.

No one had attempted to climb the nest-tree for fear of disturbing the eagles. When we had first seen the nest on 23 April it had appeared to be complete. No one saw the eagles adding sticks or lining material to it between 23 April and 10 May. Presumably it had been completed in early April or in March. I continue to be puzzled by the fact that no one reported seeing eagles carrying nest material during those months. Another point that is of considerable interest: on only one occasion during the above-reported observation period did any of us see either eagle flying, nor did we see either bird holding, eating, or obviously watching for, prey. Fish abound in the area and these presumably would not be difficult for the eagles to catch.

From now on reservoir personnel will be watching closely for an eagle carrying nest material or for courtship behavior. Depending on the weather to

some extent, such behavior might be observable in February or January or even December.

ROUTE 4, BOX 182, SALLISAW, OKLAHOMA 74955. 20 SEPTEMBER 1976.

GENERAL NOTES

Early spring date for Green Heron in Oklahoma.—At about 0830 on 22 March 1977 (morning cold and cloudy; air temperature that day 31°F. to 66°F.), several persons, including Elizabeth Hayes and me, saw two Green Herons (*Butorides striatus*) along Bird Creek in the northern part of Mohawk Park in Tulsa, Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma. No part of the creek had frozen at all recently, so far as we could tell. We were looking for Wood Ducks (*Aix sponsa*), a species reported to have bred in the area. As we approached a clearing on the creek bank, I saw a Green Heron perched on a bare branch that jutted over the water from the opposite bank. Presently, joined by a second Green Heron that had been in or under shrubbery close by, it flew downstream low over the water. Everyone clearly saw the two herons as the birds made off.

Scattered early spring and late fall sightings indicate that the Green Heron is to be looked for in winter in Oklahoma in areas having some open water. The only winter record for the state is of a bird seen repeatedly from 4 January to 2 March 1975 along Sandy Creek near Eldorado, Jackson County, southwestern Oklahoma (Tyler and Ault, 1975, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 8: 36), though a bird seen on 27 December 1971 in Ft. Smith, Arkansas (Armstrong, 1972, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 5: 26-27) was within only a few miles of the Oklahoma state line.—Jayne Christo, 5239 S. Sandusky, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74135, 9 July 1977.

Early spring sighting of Common Nighthawk in Oklahoma.—Not long before dark on the evening of 14 March 1975, 1 mile north and ¼ mile west of Indianola, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma, I watched a Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*) as it circled above overgrazed pastureland about 30 feet up. The weather was mild, so I assumed that the bird was capturing moths, midges, and other flying insects. The date was exceptionally early for a Common Nighthawk — indeed a full month earlier than 15 April, the date given for arrival of the species from the south by Sutton (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 22). According to the summary of records kept at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, on 15 April 1974, Kenneth Burns saw four Common Nighthawks circling with six Chimney Swifts (*Chaetura pelagica*) over Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma. The next earliest date on record is 18 April 1904, when G. E. Stilwell saw the species in Custer County, west-central Oklahoma (Nice, 1931, Birds of Oklahoma, p. 108).

I did not, admittedly, note the position of the white patch in each of the nighthawk's wings, so cannot say positively that the bird was not a Lesser Nighthawk (*Chordeiles acutipennis*), a species for which there is one Oklahoma record — that of a male collected by W. Marvin Davis in Boise City, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma on 23 April 1961 (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, p. 275)—but behavior of the bird seemed to me to be that of *Chordeiles minor*.—John W. Ault III, 4213 Bedford Drive, Lawton, Oklahoma 73501, 15 September 1975.

Eastern Phoebe three-brooded in southwestern Oklahoma.—During the nesting season of 1974, three broods of Eastern Phoebes (*Sayornis phoebe*) fledged at a nest under a concrete overhang in a settling tank at the water-pollution control station at Fort Sill, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. The nest had been built and used the previous season by Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*). In 1974, the phoebes relined it. Whether all three clutches of phoebe eggs were laid by the same female bird I do not know,

for neither the male nor the female was banded or color-marked.

The first egg was laid 21 March; four young hatched from a clutch of five; and three young fledged on 27 or 28 April. The first egg of the second clutch was laid 10 May; four eggs were laid; hatching started 28 May; and four young fledged on or about 16 June. The third clutch, of four eggs, was started 24 June; all eggs had hatched by 11 July; and two young fledged 29 July. I was able to inspect the nest often, for my work required that I visit the station daily except on Sundays. Newly fledged young observed while they were leaving the nest flew strongly.

According to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 338), nesting of *Sayornis phoebe* in Oklahoma extends from 13 March ("nest building") to 20 July ("brood just out of nest"); he states further that the species is "probably two-brooded as a rule."

Three broods have been mentioned often in the literature, but documentation is lacking. Todd (1940, Birds of Western Pennsylvania, Univ. Pittsburgh Press, p. 345) says: "Phoebes nest early and frequently raise two and sometimes three broods in a season." Simmons (1925, Birds of the Austin region, Univ. Texas Press, p. 157) says: "Two or three broods, generally third week in March, last week in April, and first week in June." Forbush (1927, Birds of Massachusetts and other New England states, Massachusetts Dept. Agric., Norwood, 2: 339) says: "Two broods yearly, sometimes three, when there is a long hot summer."

In the Fort Sill nestings reported above, none of the young birds seemed to be troubled by ectoparasites. Pertinent to this observation is this statement from Lewis O. Shelley: "The first nestings are invariably pretty free from parasitic pests, but second nestings may be literally overrun with mites and possible third broods will often be forced prematurely into leaving the nest. I am of the opinion that mites invariably prevent Phoebes from raising a third brood" (*in* Bent, 1942, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 179: 151).

At no time did I see an egg of the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) in the Fort Sill nestings reported above. This is noteworthy, for I did see cowbirds on several occasions near the water-pollution control station and the Eastern Phoebe "is often parasitized by cowbirds" in Oklahoma (Sutton, *loc. cit.*).—Louis E. McGee, 1703 N.W. 43rd St., Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 9 November 1977.

Third sighting of Violet-green Swallow in Oklahoma.—At about 1100 on 17 April 1976, on the northeast side of Lake Etling in Black Mesa State Park, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma, we sighted a Violet-green Swallow (*Tachycineta thalassina*). It was foraging along with Tree Swallows (*Iridoprocne bicolor*), Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*), and Rough-winged Swallows (*Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*) just above the bluffs near the lake. The wind was 25-30 mph and the sky clear. We observed the bird as close as 20 meters (about 65 feet). The white of the throat extended around the eye and included the auricular region. Each side of the rump was white. Scott Wood (field notes), looking at the bird from above, also noted the "green back with violet on the upper tail coverts."

This constitutes the third sighting of the Violet-green Swallow in Oklahoma, the other two also being from Lake Etling (Kaufman, 1971, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 4: 27-28; Tyler, 1972, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 5: 21-22).—Joseph A. Grzybowski, D. Scott Wood, and Gary D. Schnell, Dept. of Zoology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73019, 15 September 1976.

FROM THE EDITOR: Thanks to Joseph A. Grzybowski for his work with the Bald Eagle halftone that appears in this issue.