

THE PLAIN TITMOUSE IN OKLAHOMA

BY DAVID A. WIGGINS

The Plain Titmouse (*Parus inornatus*), a species easily recognizable at all seasons by its crest and slate-gray plumage, breeds in widely scattered pairs in pinyon-juniper woodland in the Black Mesa country at the northwestern corner of Oklahoma's Panhandle. The only sympatric bird with which it might be confused is the Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*), a much smaller species with proportionately longer tail and no crest. Between the habitat of the Plain Titmouse, a western bird, and that of the Tufted Titmouse (*Parus bicolor*), an eastern bird, lies a vast stretch of comparatively treeless terrain, much of it under cultivation today.



PLAIN TITMOUSE

*Photographed along Texakeet Creek about 4 miles south of Kenton, Oklahoma on 18 April 1976 by David A. Wiggins.*

*Parus inornatus* was first recorded in Oklahoma on 6 January 1920, when R. Crompton Tate saw a single bird in or near Kenton, Cimarron County (Tate, 1923, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 3: 50; Nice and Nice, 1924, The birds of Oklahoma, Univ. Studies No. 286, Univ. of Oklahoma, Norman, p. 97; Nice, 1931, The birds of Oklahoma, Revised Ed., Univ. of Oklahoma Press, p. 132). Sightings by Tate in the same area of six birds on 22 December 1922 and of three birds on 1 January 1923 were reported by Nice and Nice (*loc. cit.*) and by Nice (*loc. cit.*). The species' occurrence on the C. F. Rowan ranch near Kenton and its eating of "weed seeds" at a "feeding shelf" in Kenton were reported by Tate (1924, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 4: 35; Nice, *op. cit.*, p. 133). A further sighting by Tate of a single bird on 30 January 1930 and the taking of a specimen, presumably on one of the dates mentioned above, were reported by Nice (*op. cit.*, p. 132).

In the fall of 1932 and 1933, John B. Semple and George M. Sutton, who collected four specimens near Kenton, saw the species so many times "before any general influx of other winter visitant species had taken place" that they fell to believing that it bred in the region, even though they did not see "family flocks going about together" (Sutton, 1934, Ann. Carnegie Mus., 24: 33). Proof of breeding was obtained on 5 June 1936, when Sutton observed a pair carrying food to well-developed young in a nest "in an old woodpecker hole in a large 'mountain' pine" (Sutton, 1936, Auk, 53: 433) about four miles south of Kenton, and on 22 May 1937, when Sutton collected "a breeding male" seven miles southeast of Kenton (Sutton, 1938, Auk, 55: 505).

According to the summary of records filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, no Oklahoma sighting of the species was reported between the years 1938 and 1952. Most sightings since 1952 have been in fall and winter, though a few have been in April. Sightings since 1920 have been of singles, twosomes, and loose companies of up to four or five birds, probably family parties. The greatest number reported for one day is sixteen birds: on 28 December 1970, sixteen birds were seen by W. M. Davis *et al.* (1971, Amer. Birds, 25: 413). Whether a bond holds pairs together all year or not, family groups break up in spring, at which season single birds probably represent breeding pairs, since females are likely to be on the nest during much of the incubation period (Price, 1936, Condor, 38: 24; Dixon, 1949, Condor, 51: 126).

According to Dixon (*op. cit.*, p. 112), the density of Plain Titmouse populations in coastal California appears to be limited by the number of "cavities for nest sites" available. The breeding woodpeckers of Oklahoma's Black Mesa country include regularly the Common Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), Ladder-back (*Picoides scalaris*), Downy (*P. pubescens*), Hairy (*P. villosus*), and Red-headed (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*); irregularly the Lewis's (*M. lewis*); and rarely the Red-bellied (*M. carolinus*). Not one of these is restricted to the pinyon-juniper woodland, and the Ladder-back, perhaps the commonest of the seven, though often seen in the pinyon-juniper, digs its holes in other sorts of trees (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma Birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 318).

Whether availability of nest-holes is a determining factor or not, a second nest of *Parus inornatus* for Oklahoma was discovered on 18 April 1976 by Gary D. Schnell *et al.* along Texakeet Creek four miles south of Kenton. The nest hole, probably that of a Ladder-backed or Downy woodpecker, was about five feet from the ground in a partly dead elm about fifteen feet southwest of the Laurance Regnier ranch house. Certain members of Schnell's party saw one bird go to the nest after both birds of the pair had scolded. I photographed the bird that did not go to the nest.

Except in coastal California, where it lives chiefly among oaks (Small, 1974, *The birds of California*, Macmillan, New York, p. 106), the Plain Titmouse inhabits pinyon-juniper woodland. In more or less montane eastern California it is a bird of the pinyon-juniper (Small, *loc. cit.*). In Arizona it is common in the northern and central parts of the state, an area throughout which there is much pinyon-juniper, but rare in the southeast, where there is little or no pinyon-juniper (Phillips, Marshall and Monson, 1964, *The birds of Arizona*, Univ. of Arizona Press, Tucson, p. 111). In New Mexico it is common in the "oak and pinyon-juniper foothills" at "from 5000 to 7000 feet" (Ligon, 1961, *New Mexico birds and where to find them*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, pp. 208-209). In Colorado it is common "in the juniper-pinyon country of southern and western parts of the state" (Bailey and Niedrach, 1965, *Birds of Colorado*, Denver Mus. Nat. Hist., p. 577).

In Oklahoma, *Parus inornatus* is almost exclusively a bird of pinyon-juniper woodland. It has never been seen among the cottonwoods, willows, and salt cedar of the Cimarron River's flood-plain. Unlike the Scrub Jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*), Pinyon Jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*), and Bushtit, all of which are residents of the pinyon-juniper, it has not been observed to move eastward some winters or to descend to the lowlands during that season. Whether, like the Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) and Mountain Chickadee (*Parus gambeli*), it moves into the Black Mesa country from Colorado and New Mexico now and then is not known. The fact that the species is seen in greater numbers in fall and winter than at other seasons may well be a result of successful rearing of broods during the preceding summer.

2713 HOLLYWOOD AVENUE, NORMAN, OKLAHOMA 73069, 11 NOVEMBER 1977.

## WORK TO BE DONE IN THE BLACK MESA COUNTRY

BY GEORGE M. SUTTON

Several bird species found breeding in the Black Mesa country of far northwestern Oklahoma by R. Crompton Tate between 1908 and 1931 (see Nice, 1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, p. 43) have not been found there in summer since 1931 so far as I know, this despite the fact that much fieldwork has been done in the area. The species in this category include the Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Pedioecetes phasianellus*), Sage Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), Common

Snipe (*Capella gallinago*), Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*), Broad-tailed Hummingbird (*Selasphorus platycercus*), Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*), Sage Thasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*), Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*), White-winged Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis aikenii*), and McCown's Longspur (*Calcarius mccounii*).

The Sharp-tailed Grouse and Sage Grouse are known to have faded from the Oklahoma scene some time ago, the former presumably about 1912, the latter about 1920 (Nice, *op. cit.*, p. 81), so no one has been expecting to find either of them in the Panhandle at any season during recent years; but most of the others occur regularly as transients or winter visitants, or both, the one exception being the Broad-tailed Hummingbird, a species which is common in the mountains of Colorado and New Mexico and which is to be looked for in Oklahoma.

In my continuing fieldwork in the Black Mesa country during the past 40-some years, I have paid special attention to the above-named birds. I see no reason why some of them should not breed at least occasionally in Black Mesa State Park or thereabouts, so they are to be watched carefully by all who are afield there in spring and summer. To be borne in mind is the fact that breeding is usually accompanied by demonstrations of some sort: if Common Snipes are breeding there should be at least some aerial hooting; a courting male Broad-tailed Hummingbird, making a shrill beady sound as it whizzes past, should be conspicuous; Yellow-headed Blackbirds should be singing their unmusical songs from the cattails; and McCown's Longspurs should be flight-singing.

The following species, most of them not mentioned in any of Tate's published notes, are to be looked for:

1. California Gull. *Larus californicus*. This species may migrate regularly through Oklahoma, but it is not on the state's "official list" since neither an Oklahoma specimen nor an identifiable photograph taken in Oklahoma is available for reference. Adult birds in spring look like under-sized Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*), but the legs are greenish rather than pink; the black of the wingtips is said to be noticeable from below; and the tip of the bill has a dark mark in addition to the orange spot. Immature birds are virtually impossible to distinguish from immature Herring Gulls in the field. Any gull believed to be a California, whether adult or immature, should be collected.

2. Western Flycatcher. *Empidonax difficilis*. Has been taken once near Kenton (Weske, 1976, *Auk*, 93: 655-56) and should be looked for. Most sight records are not acceptable, however, since the Western Flycatcher so closely resembles the Yellow-bellied (*E. flaviventris*), which breeds across the continent from northern British Columbia to Labrador, and is likely therefore to occur anywhere in Oklahoma as a transient.

3. Black-capped Chickadee. *Parus atricapillus*. This proportionately long-tailed, short-winged species may drift southward into Oklahoma occasionally in winter, though it is not strongly migratory. The spring song should be of two

notes only — a simple *phée-bee*, the former syllable higher in pitch than the latter.

4. Pygmy Nuthatch. *Sitta pygmaea*. The first specimen for the state, a breeding male, was collected on 22 May 1937 by George H. Lowery Jr. A specimen in *juvenal* feather was collected on 22 August 1972 by William A. Carter. The species no doubt nests in the Black Mesa country, but no nest has thus far been found. Young birds may have left the nest by May, for the species breeds early.

5. Gray Vireo. *Vireo vicinior*. The species has been taken once near Kenton — male of a breeding pair on 22 May 1937 (Sutton, 1938, Auk, 55: 505). To be looked for among the pinyon, juniper, and scrubby oak of the mesas. The species has a longish tail that it "wags" gnatcatcher-fashion.

6. Virginia's Warbler. *Vermivora virginiae*. Occurs regularly as a transient in western Oklahoma. Several specimens have been taken. Breeding pairs should be looked for among the mesas. The song is an unmusical but fairly noticeable series of chips.

STOVALL MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND HISTORY, UNIV. OKLAHOMA, NORMAN 73019, 18 JANUARY 1978.

### GENERAL NOTES

**Wood Duck nesting in Norman, Oklahoma.**—On 25 March 1976, William H. Campbell observed three Wood Ducks (*Aix sponsa*) flying up and down the small stream that flows just back of his house at 2601 S. Berry Road in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma. Large trees grow along the stream, which has been dammed at one point. The impoundment is small, but the whole area is wooded despite its residentiality. Dr. Campbell did not see the ducks clearly enough to be sure of their sex, but he could not help wondering whether the species might nest in the vicinity.

On the following 20 May, within an hour after my return from Mexico, I received a telephone call from Bruce Granger, who lives at 944 Chautauqua Street about 2 miles from the Campbell residence. Dr. Granger told me of "a strange bird that looks like a duck" that was in his back yard at the moment and that had "nine little ones" with it. Hardly knowing what to make of such a report, I hurried to the Granger house in the gathering dusk, identified the "strange bird" as a hen Wood Duck, and watched mother and brood as they moved about close to the woven wire fence. Knowing that there were many cats and dogs in the neighborhood, and that the closest pond was the so-called "Duck Pond" on the university campus fully half a mile away, Dr. Granger, his wife Rosemary, and I decided to catch all 10 birds if we could and move them to the Duck Pond before dark. The chase began. I managed to get close to the mother bird several times, but she was remarkably agile. Had I rushed her while she was trying to push through the fence I might have caught her, but I missed this chance. Presently she flew lightly over the fence, alighted in the deep grass, and called her brood. Almost immediately the 10 birds disappeared.

We found them again in a remote corner of the plot, but again we failed to catch the mother. The ducklings now began scattering widely. Their peeping attracted two cats, which drew closer rapidly. Human shouts held off the cats while the mother's calls reassembled the brood. The 10 birds now moved back toward the Granger yard. Just at nightfall, while the mother was covering the brood, I almost caught her. The ducklings, now all in one place, were bewildered. As they started running this way and that, close to the fence, I caught six of them. By this time the mother was some distance off in a paved area among some parked cars. When I released the ducklings, they ran toward their mother, but I despaired of their surviving. By this time it was so dark that I could not clearly see either the mother bird or the ducklings.

The following day Norman Runge, a tree surgeon, volunteered to help us find the cavity in which the duck had laid her eggs. With his big ladder he investigated first the big old maple in the Granger yard, then tree after tree in the neighborhood. He found many cavities, some quite large, but none with down lining. His comment after two hours of work: "I can't imagine a pleasanter way to spend a Sunday than this."

On 24 March 1977, Dr. Campbell telephoned me again, this time to say that he had just seen two Wood Ducks flying up and down the stream near his house. One bird was a drake, the other a hen. Whether or not the 1976 nesting was successful — and I suspect that it wasn't — let us hope that the birds will try again.—George M. Sutton, 818 West Brooks St., Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 25 March 1977.

**Red-tailed Hawks and snake.**—On the morning of 14 June 1977 (air temperature about 85°F. at noon), near Tulsa, Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma, Hannah Bass, Louis Bentley and his wife Alma, Jayne Christo, Robert J. Farris, Elizabeth Hayes, Norman Weisenborn, and I watched an adult Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) take a large living snake from a smaller adult Red-tail while the two birds were flying almost directly above us. As the two hawks circled higher, we could see the snake writhing in the talons of the smaller bird. The larger hawk, with legs extended, lunged twice at the other, obviously intent on taking the snake, but the attempts failed. With the third lunge — while we who were watching held our breath — the larger bird took the snake and dropped to the ground perhaps a quarter of a mile away, followed closely by the other hawk. We could not tell what happened on the ground, for we could not see the birds there. Nor could we be sure that the birds were a pair. We know only that the two were adult and that one appeared to be larger than the other. — Eleanor Sieg, 5152 S. Urbana, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74135, 30 September 1977.

**Yellow Rail sighted in Payne County, Oklahoma.** — On 23 April 1975, at one of three small ponds on our place 2½ miles north of Stillwater, Payne County, north-central Oklahoma, I observed a Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) at close range. My notes for the day read as follows: "About 2:00 P.M. Bright sunshine. I was fishing from an inner tube floater when I spotted a new bird. It was a rail— smaller than Sora [*Porzana carolina*] and different color. It worked through the pond's edge—small sedges and grass. I approached from the center of the pond to about 30 feet of the bird. It continued its slow, high stepping gait unbothered by my presence. Whenever I tried to move closer (20 ft.) it became nervous and I'd retreat back to about 30 ft. from shore line. I followed it for a good hour and it never took flight. Its head would dart quickly at whatever food it was taking and it would also flick its tail, the under side of which was a rich buffy color. The bird would hop up on a twig or blade that it couldn't go under. At other times it would swim around an obstacle."

The Yellow Rail has been reported heretofore from only two places in Oklahoma — Fort Wayne, Delaware County, near the Oklahoma-Arkansas state line, where H. L. Eustis took a specimen on 7 March 1842 (Tomer, 1959, Auk, 76: 94-95), and a TV tower 2 miles north of Coweta, Wagoner County, under which two specimens were found in the fall of 1976, one on 27 September, the other on 3 October (Norman, 1977, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 10: 7). The species is exceedingly secretive, hence is not often seen. The white patch on the wing (secondaries) is a good field mark if the bird can be flushed from the vegetation. Its bill is never strongly yellow as in the Sora. — Delores Scott, 4224 N. Washington, R.R. 2, Stillwater, Oklahoma 74074, 12 May 1977.

**Marbled Godwit in Tulsa County, Oklahoma.**—In early afternoon on 17 April 1977 (a cool, somewhat rainy day, with mild wind), my husband Bruce and I observed two Marbled Godwits (*Limosa fedoa*) feeding along the muddy east edge of Sperry Lake in the northern part of Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma. The birds were in shallow

water, not far from a stand of cattails. To our surprise we saw no other shorebirds along that stretch of shore, but we did see there six Great Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*), five Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*), and — farther out, in deeper water — a Gadwall (*Anas strepera*), several Blue-winged Teal (*A. discors*), and a Northern Shoveler (*A. clypeata*). We watched the godwits for about 15 minutes, noting their over-all brownish color and long, dark, slightly upturned bills, which were reddish at the base. When the birds flew, we noted that the rump and tail were about the same color as the back, there being no white anywhere. The wings were reddish brown underneath. The godwits alighted in the southwestern corner of the impoundment, but we did not pursue them further.

To the best of my knowledge, *Limosa fedoa* has not heretofore been reported from Tulsa County; it has, however, been seen in Washington, Rogers, and Nowata counties. The species is considered commoner in central Oklahoma than in eastern; there is only one record for the Panhandle — of a single bird seen at Lake Etling in Black Mesa State Park on 2 May 1975 (Tyler, 1976, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 9: 13). — Anne Reynolds, Box 35371, Tulsa, 74135, 10 June 1977.

**First hummingbird nest for Pawnee County, Oklahoma.** — On 20 June 1976, while observing birds in a heavily forested rocky canyon near the Arkansas River between the towns of Cleveland and Blackburn in Pawnee County, northeastern Oklahoma, I chanced to see a female hummingbird, almost certainly a Ruby-throat (*Archilochus colubris*), as she alighted on a sunny perch. Her short flights to three other perches and her seemingly cautious behavior made me curious. To my surprise, her fourth flight took her straight to her nest, which was about 15 feet up in a small chinquapin oak growing in the canyon's bottom. As she perched on the nest's rim, two little heads stretched upward with open bills. After the brood had been fed, they huddled down out of sight in the bottom of the nest.

I returned to the nest on 26 and 27 June and on 3 July. The young birds became steadily more aggressive when begging for food. The nest was supported on one side by a vertical twig to which the female clung above her vigorous brood while feeding them. As the young birds became larger, they no longer sat side by side in the bottom of the nest: one had to sit high, the other low. They spent a lot of time, too, in what appeared to be play behavior and changed positions often. When I made my last trip to the nest on 10 July, I found it empty.

Discovery of this nest was quite accidental, as was that of the nest found in Payne County by Rickstrew (1976, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 9: 12-13). According to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 285), no hummingbird nest has heretofore been reported from Pawnee County, Oklahoma. — Neil Garrison, 917 N. Yale, Apt. 32, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74115, 1 August 1976.

**Scissor-tailed Flycatcher parasitized by cowbird in Oklahoma.** — On 27 May 1975, while searching for birds' nests in mesquite-infested pastureland 11.2 kilometers (about 7 miles) west of Lawton, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma, I found the nest of a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Muscivora forficata*) about 4 meters (12.8 feet) up in a mesquite tree. In the nest were three eggs, two of the scissortail and one of the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*).

I visited the nest three times thereafter: On 28 May it contained three scissortail eggs and one cowbird egg; on 3 June, five scissortail eggs only; on 14 June, two freshly hatched scissortail chicks. At each visit I saw one or both parent scissortails. In my opinion the scissortails removed the cowbird egg, but I had no way of knowing that they did so.

Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 334) stated that the scissortail "is not parasitized" by the cowbird in Oklahoma. *Muscivora forficata* was, however, listed among the victims of the cowbird by Simmons (1925, Birds of the Austin region, Univ. Texas Press, Austin, p. 172); two records of cowbird eggs in scissortail nests

in Wise County, north-central Texas were cited by Friedmann (1963, Host relations of the parasitic cowbirds, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 233: 50); and observation of a scissortail feeding a fledgling cowbird on 29 June 1959 in Tarrant County, north-central Texas, was reported by Pulich (1961, Birds of Tarrant County, Allen and Co., Printers, Fort Worth, p. 52). — Dennis C. Parmley, *Department of Biology, Midwestern State University, Wichita Falls, Texas 76038, 3 November 1977.*

**Yellow-throated Warbler in Comanche County, Oklahoma.**—From about 1030 to 1505 on 24 May 1977 (a pleasant day), my wife Velma and I observed a male Yellow-throated Warbler (*Dendroica dominica*) in a 30-foot pine — a transplant from southeastern Oklahoma — in our front yard in Fletcher, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. The bird picked about for food, part of the time at old cones, stopping now and then to sing. He never was more than 12 or 15 feet up in the tree.

We taped the songs first from the open garage about 50 feet from the pine, then from the front steps of the house about 25 feet from the pine. On the tapes with the warbler's songs are songs of the American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) and Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*). We were certain of our identification, but we compared the song as we had taped it with songs on a commercial record.

*Dendroica dominica* is an eastern warbler that has heretofore been sighted in Comanche County only once: on 22 May 1969, Janet M. McGee saw one in her yard at 1703 N. 43rd Street in Lawton. The species is known to have bred sparingly as far west as Tulsa, Creek, and Cleveland counties (Nice, 1931, Birds of Oklahoma, p. 160; Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 507), and there is one record of a singing male seen in Cimarron County at the western end of the Panhandle on 9 May 1970 (Rice, 1971, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 4: 18-18).—Carroll Ridgway, *Box 493, Fletcher, Oklahoma 73541, 14 June 1977.*

**Bushtit in Woods County, Oklahoma.**—At about 1800 on 14 May 1977 (sky overcast; very little wind) Thomas Flowers (a fellow student at Fort Hays State University) and I saw a single Bushlit (*Pealtriparus minimus*) in open sand-sage country in northwestern Woods County, Oklahoma, on the plateau-like east bank of the Cimarron River west of State Highway 10, about 5 miles southwest of the village of Lookout and 8½ miles south of the Kansas state line. The bird flew from the sage, alighted on a fence about 3 meters (10 feet) from us, giving us an excellent look at its small size, drab coloration, and long tail, then flew back into the sage without making a sound. I have seen much of the Bushtit in southern Arizona, so know the bird well. The species has not heretofore been reported from Woods County, Oklahoma, though there are valid records for Woodward, Ellis, and Comanche counties (Sutton, 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 29).—Renne Lohoefer, *Dept. of Biology, Fort Hays State University, Hayes, Kansas 67601, 18 May 1977.*

FROM THE EDITOR: An article in the Elk City Daily News of 15 December 1977 and kindly sent to me by Exa Kelly deserves comment. It reported the addition of an observation tower at the Washita National Wildlife Refuge near Clinton specifically for use by anyone interested in watching the numerous water birds of Foss Reservoir. The tower's steel frame was acquired from an electrical power company as surplus and converted by refuge personnel. A similar tower at the Salt Plains refuge enables birders to enjoy their hobby regardless of the weather. With encouragement and support from local O.O.S. members, towers might be erected at other lakes throughout the state.—J.D. Tyler.

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