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SUCCESSFUL NESTING OF THE BALD EAGLE IN EAST-CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

By LOYD D. ISLEY

The national bird of the United States of America, the Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), has recently received world-wide attention for the smaller, more southward-ranging of its two currently-recognized races has become so rare as to be considered "endangered" — i.e., threatened with ex-



BALD EAGLES AT NEST

Photographed by Harry Smith Jr. at Robert S. Kerr Reservoir, east-central Oklahoma, on 7 June 1977. The mouth of the young bird (at left) is wide open: only the maxilla (upper part of the bill) shows in the photo; what appears to be the mandible (lower part of the bill) is actually the tongue.

inction. The fact that Bald Eagles have wintered in steadily growing numbers in Oklahoma during the past quarter century has focused attention upon the species' behavior, habitat preferences, and food requirements in winter in this part of the continent.

Favored spots for Oklahoma's wintering Bald Eagles have been certain large impoundments, notably Grand Lake, in the northeastern corner of the state (Johnson, 1960, *Southwestern Naturalist*, 6: 107-108; Lish, 1973, *Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc.*, 6:25-30), Comanche and Grama lakes in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, in southwestern Oklahoma (Halloran, 1960, *Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci.*, 40:120), and the main reservoir at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge, in north-central Oklahoma (Lish and Lewis, 1975, *Proc. 29th Ann. Confer. Southeastern Assn. Game and Fish Commissioners*, pp. 415-73).

At the Robert S. Kerr Reservoir in east-central Oklahoma, personnel of the Ranger Staff have recently paid special attention to the Bald Eagles. Much of the reservoir is within the confines of the Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge where, on 27 December 1975, Robert Stratton Jr. *et al.* counted three adult and 16 immature Bald Eagles (1976, *Amer. Birds*, 30: 496). This population dwindled as spring advanced, but a pair of adults remained in the area, built a nest in a dead tree along Sans Bois Creek about 2 miles west of the town of Keota in Haskell County, and were observed by members of the Kerr Reservoir staff as late as 10 May 1976. What the nest contained was not known, though an eagle presumed to be incubating eggs or brooding young was photographed while on it on 1 May. Later that same week several storm fronts with strong wind and heavy rain tore part of the nest away and the eagles left the area (Carmichael, 1977, *Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc.*, 11: 4-7).

In the fall of 1977 the Bald Eagle population at the Sequoyah refuge was not very large: on 18 December of that year B. Anduss *et al.* counted only two adult and five immature birds there (1978, *Amer. Birds*, 32: 759). Bearing in mind the eagles' unsuccessful nesting in 1976, we of the Kerr Reservoir Ranger Staff continued to watch them closely. On 9 March 1978, John Carmichael and Billye J. Morris found a nest, with two Bald Eagles on it, again along Sans Bois Creek not far from the place at which the nest had been in 1976. The nest was in a dead tree that stood in water about 3 feet deep.

Determined to protect the eagles, we of the Ranger Staff checked the nest almost daily, approaching it quietly, never getting very close, and making no attempt to climb the tree. At almost every visit we saw one bird on the nest — not standing on the rim, but settled down as if brooding eggs or young. We made no attempt to investigate from a helicopter for fear the noise and excitement would cause the birds to desert.

From mid-April to mid-May most observations were made by Ranger Terry L. Lyons. On 21 April, Lyons reported that one of the eagles was "moving something about deep in the nest." On 18 May, he reported seeing "something smaller than the adult inside the nest and moving about." On 24 May, he

saw "an animal about 8 inches in diameter, light brown in color, moving about in the nest." He was almost certain that this "animal" was an eaglet, but since he was at least 500 yards away, he couldn't be sure.

When we at the office learned of the "animal" that Lyons had seen, everyone was excited. During the following two weeks many trips were made to the nest-tree. On some of these, observers approached to within about 100 yards. On 7 June, Harry Smith Jr., Engineer Technician, and Jack P. Welch, Survey Boat Operator, eased up close enough to get photographs of the old bird and its progeny with Smith's camera and 800 mm. telephoto lens. On that date the eaglet appeared to be about three-quarters the size of the adult. It was well feathered and "solid dark brown" all over. Several pictures taken that day show the old birds feeding the young one and watching the intruders in the boat.

On 15 June, I took Robert J. Farris of Tulsa, Oklahoma to see the nest. Our flat-bottomed boat approached to within about 100 yards of the nest-tree. The eaglet lay quietly in the nest as we watched it through our binoculars. The old bird circled above us several times, never threatening to attack, but giving a series of clucking sounds that ended in a sort of whistle.

On 26 June, Harry Smith and Robert Foster observed what may well have been the young eagle's first flight. The eaglet climbed a branch to a point about 2 feet above the nest, glided back to the nest on widespread wings, and "ground-looped" on landing. It fed from time to time on items that were in the nest. One parent, a very large bird that we believed to be the female, stayed close by, but did not feed the eaglet. The other parent did not come at all close to the nest.

On 28 June, we noted that the eaglet's feet were quite yellow. This foot-color had been noticed before, but on 28 June it seemed to be conspicuous. One of the old birds was perched in a tree not far away. On 1 July, the young bird was standing on one side of the nest and a parent was perched in a tree not far off. On 2, 5, and 8 July, the young bird was not on the nest but on a limb somewhat above the nest.

On 9 July, the eaglet was perched not on or near the nest but in the top of a dead tree about 75 yards from the nest-tree. We had no way of knowing, of course, whether it had moved that far in one flight. On 10 July, the young bird and one of its parents were perched in separate trees, each about 75 yards from the nest-tree. Even as we watched, the fledgling made a 200-yard flight to another perch. "A little awkward but not bad" were the words that I scribbled in my notebook.

At evening twilight on 14 July, the young eagle and one of its parents were about 100 yards from the nest and well apart, the former to the south of the nest-tree, the latter to the east. Though we looked for the eagles on 19 and 21 July, we failed to find either a young bird or an adult. We still do not know how many eggs had been laid in the nest, nor have we ascertained what the old birds brought to the eaglet as food. But we view with great pride the fact that a

Bald Eagle was actually fledged at the Robert S. Kerr Reservoir in the spring of 1978.

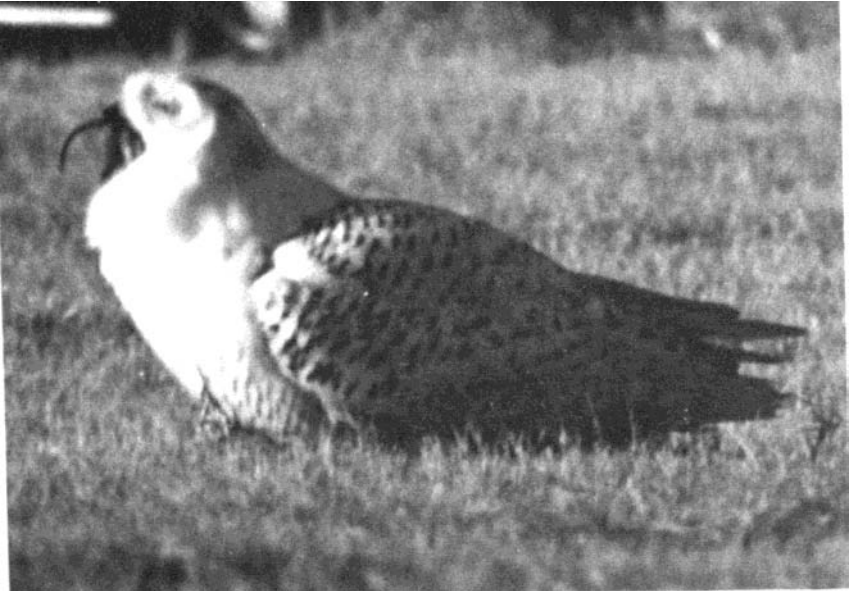
HAMMS COURT 'E, SALLISAW, OKLAHOMA 74955. 15 AUGUST 1978.

A SNOWY OWL AT OKLAHOMA CITY'S AIRPORT

BY WESLEY S. ISAACS

During the winter of 1976-77 a Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) lived at the Will Rogers airport in the southwestern part of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma. I watched the bird on several occasions between 4 December and 23 February. Habitually it spent several daylight hours (from about 1000 to 1630) at one of two spots on the ground. At these spots I picked up a total of eight pellets, each of which contained fur and bones of Hispid Cotton Rats (*Sigmodon hispidus*) chiefly. The owl was conspicuous when on a fencepost or another of its favorite perches, a shaded lamp about 30 feet above ground along one edge of the airport.

When I first saw the owl, at 1400 on 4 December, it was on the ground at one of the two spots above mentioned. At 0605 on 16 December I could see it fairly well despite the semi-darkness. It was perched on one of the posts of a chain-link fence whose woven wire extended downward to within a foot of the ground. About 25 feet away, under the same fence, crouched a Black-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*). Even as I watched, the owl tried to catch the rabbit, which



SNOWY OWL SWALLOWING COTTON RAT

Photographed by Wesley S. Isaacs at the Oklahoma City airport on 10 February 1977. The owl swallowed the rat whole.

did not run off when attacked, but merely moved to the other side of the fence. The foiled owl alighted on the fence directly above the rabbit. About five minutes later the rabbit hopped off into the darkness, keeping under the fence as long as I could see it. The owl did not follow it.

At about 1615 on 24 January 1977 (my son Kevin was with me), I again saw the owl try to catch a jackrabbit. The owl was perched on the shaded lamp referred to above and the rabbit was under the fence. When the owl swooped, the rabbit hopped to the other side of the fence. The owl alighted on the fence above the rabbit. There the owl stayed for about ten minutes. The rabbit now dashed straight away from the fence, with the owl after it. Just as the owl was about to pounce, the rabbit made a sharp left turn, evading its pursuer. The owl circled, swooped again, but missed when the rabbit made another sharp left turn. The rabbit now ran back to the fence, followed by the owl, which alighted above its intended prey. Presently the rabbit left the fence again, and again the owl gave chase and swooped — but in vain. This time the owl returned not to the fence but to the shaded light, where it settled down, presumably to watch for smaller prey.

On 25 January, following the suggestion of Warren D. Harden, I tried to lure the owl into a trap baited with a live Common Hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*). I wanted to band the owl. At 1615 I placed the trap in short grass about 100 yards from the owl, which was perched on the fence. Hardly had I got back to my car when the owl flew to the hamster; but all it did when it got there was sit by the trap and look at the rodent. After watching the hamster for about five minutes it regurgitated a pellet and flew off. I collected the pellet.

On 26 January John Shackford and I tied the hamster outside the trap, hoping that the owl, which was about 100 yards away, would take it. So far as we could tell, the owl ignored the hamster completely. We tried three times that day to catch the owl in this way, but failed.

Early in the morning on 10 February the owl was on its lamp-post perch as I stopped my car at the side of the road. Between the car and a parking lot a few rods off was a grassy stretch that was free of snow. Even as I watched the owl, it flew down, caught a Cotton Rat, and swallowed the apparently full grown animal whole right in front of me (see photo).

On 12 February, at 0725, I saw the owl drive off a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) that had alighted on the chain-link fence. Throughout the period of the owl's stay, I often saw large hawks, chiefly red-tails, in the vicinity, but not at the airport itself.

1394 LAFAYETTE DRIVE, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73119. 23 FEBRUARY 1977

GENERAL NOTES

Early nesting of Great Horned Owl in Oklahoma.—On 16 January 1975 I flushed a Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) from a clutch of four eggs in a nest that had been used the preceding spring by Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*). The nest was 42 feet up in a large elm about 3 miles northwest of Cyril, Caddo County, southwestern Oklahoma. In 1974 I had found four Great Horned Owl eggs in a tree-cavity nest only about

40 yards from the 1975 nest with four-egg clutch, so I surmised that the same bird had laid both clutches. In 1974 all four eggs had hatched and all four young had fledged. The cavity had been used by Great Horned Owls in 1972 and 1973 also, but I am not sure how many eggs had been laid in those years.

Mid-January is early for egg-laying in Oklahoma. Bent (1938, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 170, Pt. 2, p. 298) calls the Great Horned Owl "our earliest breeder, often laying its eggs in February, or sometimes in January, as far north as New England and New York, a month or six weeks earlier than our largest hawks." In Florida eggs are laid "in midwinter, from about the middle of December to February" (Howell, 1932, Florida bird life, p. 293). The earliest egg date on record for Oklahoma (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 257) is 6 February: on that date in 1955 V. E. Dowell found a nest containing two eggs near Willis, Marshall County, south-central Oklahoma. No one knows, of course, when those eggs had been laid.

The Great Horned Owl rarely lays four eggs. In Massachusetts all nests found by Bent (*op. cit.*, p. 302) contained "two eggs or two young, never more or fewer." Clutches of three are not, according to data filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, rare in Oklahoma, and three young are often reared here, but no clutch of four has heretofore been reported for the state so far as I know.—William G. Voelker, *Box 64, Route 2, Millstadt, Illinois 62260, 22 February 1975.*

Early spring arrival date for Western Kingbird in Oklahoma.—On 3 April 1975, about 1 mile south of Eldorado, Jackson County, southwestern Oklahoma, Jimmy W. Tinsley and I observed a Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) perched on a barbed-wire fence. The bird was lethargic, less active than flycatchers usually are. Native pastureland and a small intermittent stream were to the west and plowed ground to the east. A light south wind was blowing, the sky clear, the air temperature about 50°F.

The earliest spring arrival date heretofore on record for *Tyrannus verticalis* in Oklahoma is 9 April (Sutton, 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., University of Oklahoma, Norman, p. 25). According to the summary of records on file at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, R. R. Graber and his wife Jean saw a single Western Kingbird in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma on 9 April 1953; the "next earliest" spring records are of a single bird seen by J. D. Tyler *et al.* at Anadarko, Caddo County, southwestern Oklahoma, on 13 April 1974, and of a single bird seen along the north edge of Norman by L. W. Oring on 14 April 1965.—John W. Ault III, *4213 Bedford Dr., Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 15 June 1976.*

Say's Phoebe in Payne County, Oklahoma.—On 20 March 1978, as Charlene Anderson, Berniece Frichot, J. L. White, and I were driving along a county road on our way to City Lake near Cushing, Payne County, north-central Oklahoma, we had a good look at a Say's Phoebe (*Sayornis saya*). The bird was perched on a fencewire, headed into the wind. Its rufous underparts, gray upperparts, and high-crowned head were instantly apparent. We watched it for about ten minutes. It flew first to a fencepost, then to the ground, then upward over our car's hood in pursuit of a flying insect, finally to a dead weed well back from the fence in a field.

Say's Phoebe has not, according to the summary of records on file at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, heretofore been reported from Payne County. There is, however, a record for Garfield County, north-central Oklahoma, that of a single bird seen near Enid by Joy Robertson on 18 September 1968 (1969, Audubon Field Notes, 23: 76; Sutton, 1974, Check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. of Oklahoma, Norman, p. 25).—Deloris Isted, *1124 E. Ninth Pl., Cushing, Oklahoma 74023, 1 June 1978.*

Rusty Blackbird feeds on American Goldfinch.—Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) often feed in my backyard in Bartlesville, Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma in winter, but until the morning of 13 January 1979 I had never seen a Rusty Blackbird

Euphagus carolinus) there. On that morning (air temperature less than 20°F.; snow had covered the ground for about 10 days), I saw what I thought was a Starling feeding on a small dead bird in an open but unset trap mounted on a clothesline post. On examination with binocular I saw that the predator was a Rusty Blackbird, and its victim an American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*) in winter feather. My husband John and I watched the blackbird for several minutes. After it left the trap — apparently disturbed by our movements at the window — it fed for some time on grain scattered on the ground, but did not return to the trap. When I retrieved the goldfinch, I found that the top of its head had been picked bare of feathers and skin; the skull, though exposed, was intact; and most of the feathers, skin, and flesh were gone from the breast and belly and some from the back.

Although we did not see the attack, it seems probable that the blackbird had killed the goldfinch while the latter was feeding in the trap. A letter (from Jessie D. Cummings of Anahuac, southeastern Texas, to Ruthven Deane) published in Bent (1958, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 211: 291) described Rusty and "Crow" blackbirds (*Quiscalus quiscula*) killing and feeding on Common Snipes (*Capella gallinago*) and American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) during "a period of 3 or 4 days" when snow covered the ground "to a depth of 20 inches." Cummings stated that the blackbirds ate "only the head, or as near as I could see, the brain, while the body was left untouched." He considered the Rusty Blackbirds "the principal aggressors".—Emma H. Messerly, 344 S.E. Elmhurst, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74003, 16 January 1979.

Common Redpoll in northeastern Oklahoma.—In February and March of 1978 at least four small, red-capped finches, all believed to be Common Redpolls (*Carduelis flammea*), were observed within the corporate limits of Bartlesville, Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma. The first of these, three birds with pink breasts, seen on 9 February by Wilburene Favre at her house at 712 Winding Way, were at a feeder with Purple Finches (*Carpodacus purpureus*) and American Goldfinches (*Carduelis tristis*). No redpoll with pink breast was subsequently reported by anyone that season.

On 19 February I observed a female bird (no pink on breast) that was eating sunflower seed that had fallen from a feeder on my porch. One week later (26 February), I caught what might well have been this same bird in a small sparrow trap. With it in the trap was a Pine Siskin (*C. pinus*). The redpoll's rump was white, streaked with dark brown.

On 4, 5, 6, 14, 15, 16, and 20 March a female bird (no pink on breast) was seen by Paul Hefty and his wife Iris at a feeder at their house at 335 Robin Road. Mrs. Hefty and Ella Delap of Dewey, Oklahoma, observed the bird closely on 14 March; they were convinced that its rump was not white, but streaked with dark gray.—Elizabeth Hicks, 815 S. Jennings, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74003, 20 October 1978.

Common Redpoll in central Oklahoma.—Every day from 13 January to 23 February 1978 a Common Redpoll (*Carduelis flammea*) visited feeders in my yard in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, along with scores of Pine Siskins (*C. pinus*) and American Goldfinches (*C. tristis*). Snow was on the ground during the entire period, so seed-eating birds were prompt in availing themselves of the food that my feeders provided. Virtually every bird student of the area came to see the redpoll, whose breast was pink and whose rump was grayish white streaked with dark gray. I took many color photographs, two of which clearly show the streaking on the rump.

At the request of George M. Sutton, who informed me that no Oklahoma specimen of *Carduelis flammea* had ever been preserved, I captured the redpoll on 23 February. It proved to a fully adult male of the wide-ranging nominate race, *C. f. flammea* (UOMZ 13080; weight 14.5 grams; fairly fat; skull fully pneumatized; testes slightly enlarged; wing 71 mm., tail 56).—Wesley Isaacs, 1304 LaFayette Drive, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73119, 15 March 1978.

Common Redpoll in west-central Oklahoma.—In the early afternoon on 22 January 1978 (sky clear after a morning of heavy fog; hoar frost and ice-coating on all vegetation; north wind 8-10 mph; temperature not far above freezing, though some ice was melting; snow up to an inch deep in some level areas), while I was driving with Lulu Hixson along a paved country road in Washita County 1 mile south and 4 east of Elk City, west-central Oklahoma, a flock of about 40 small birds flew across the road in front of the car, alighting among weeds and grasses on a slope close by. I stopped to ascertain what the birds were, expecting them to be Pine Siskins (*Carduelis pinus*), for that species had been unusually common earlier in the season, but they proved to be American Goldfinches (*C. tristis*).

While looking for a siskin to show Mrs. Hixson, I saw a bird that I knew instantly was neither a siskin nor a goldfinch, for it had a red crown-patch. It moved three times, but I kept it in view. Its upper parts were heavily streaked throughout, and its chin was black. Its throat and breast were, so far as I could see, without pink. I decided that it could be nothing but a female (or possibly a young male) Common Redpoll (*C. flammea*). The fact that its rump was streaked ruled out the possibility of its being a Hoary Redpoll (*C. hornemanni*).

We chased the birds back and forth for half an hour. Passing cars flushed them repeatedly. No more than ten or so of them were ever in sight at any one time. As the wind increased, they became more difficult to observe. At times the whole flock dropped into the grass or flew over a fence row and down into the furrows of a plowed field.

We returned later in the afternoon and found the flock again without difficulty, but the wind had become stronger, and I failed to find the redpoll. I returned alone repeatedly during the next week or so when weather permitted, but the birds had apparently exhausted the supply of seeds and moved on. I did, however, come upon a flock of goldfinches about a mile south of the spot at which I had seen them on 22 January. I did not see the redpoll among them. The weather continued to be extremely cold. There was so much snow that I was unable to work the area at all on many days.

The seeds on which the birds were feeding on 22 January were chiefly those of the Golden Crown Beard or Cowpen Daisy (*Verbesina encelioides*), according to Johnnie I. Gentry, Curator of the Bebb Herbarium at the University of Oklahoma.—Ina S. Brown, 106 Sunset, Elk City, Oklahoma 73644, 15 February 1978.

FROM THE EDITOR—The following persons are to be thanked for their help with this issue of the *Bulletin*: John S. Tomer, who told us of Loyd Isley's observations of the Bald Eagles that were nesting at Kerr Reservoir; Robert J. Farris, who went out of his way to examine all photographs that had been taken of the eagles and their nest to make sure that the one reproduced here would be the best of them; Johnnie L. Gentry Jr., Curator of the Bebb Herbarium at the University of Oklahoma, for his identification of the composite whose seeds the goldfinches near Elk City were eating; and Allan R. Phillips, who was kind enough to compare Wesley Isaacs's Common Redpoll directly with the large series representing that species at the U.S. National Museum, thus confirming George M. Sutton's identification of the specimen as *Carduelis f. flammea*.

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