

BREEDING OF THE RUFOUS-SIDED TOWHEE IN OKLAHOMA

by FREDERICK M. BAUMGARTNER

On or about 15 June 1977, Richard Sanders discovered the nest of a Rufous-sided Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) on a slope about half a mile south of Spavinaw Creek and 4 miles north of Colcord, in Delaware County, northeastern Oklahoma. The nest was on the ground under a scrubby oak in open oak-hickory woodland throughout which were brushpiles, blown-over dead trees, and a variety of forbs and grasses. In the nest were three large young, one of which scrambled off as Sanders approached. On 22 June, research students D. C. Rudolph (Texas Tech. University, Lubbock, Texas) and Christina Swartz (Little Lewis Whirlwind Nature School, Jay, Oklahoma) saw an adult male and female Rufous-sided Towhee near the nest site, thus confirming



NEST OF RUFOUS-SIDED TOWHEE

Photographed on 11 May 1978 by Marguerite Baumgartner in open pine-oak woodland near Colcord, Delaware County, northeastern Oklahoma.

Sanders's provisional identification, though they did not see any of the young birds that day. On 25 June the nest was collected. It has been presented to the University of Oklahoma Bird Range.

On 10 May 1978, Mary Louise Guess, of Bethany, Oklahoma, found a Rufous-sided Towhee nest on the Guess property about three quarters of a mile east of the spot at which the 1977 nest had been. On 11 May, my wife Marguerite and I visited this nest. With us were the Looneys (Murray Looney and his wife Mary), whose property abuts the Guess acreage. The nest was on a west-facing slope above a narrow rocky ravine in an open stand of small short-leaf pines, large post oaks, large black oaks, and fire-scarred snags with an understory of oak saplings, sassafras, flowering dogwood, and azalea. Various grasses and forbs formed a fairly dense ground cover.

The female towhee flushed from the nest when we were about 25 feet away, alighted briefly about 12 feet from the nest, and disappeared. The nest was sunk in the ground under a small shrubby deerberry (*Vaccinium stamineum*) and framed by a thick mat of dead leaves. It contained four eggs that appeared to have been lightly incubated. Nest and site were photographed that day by my wife and a slide of each was presented to the University of Oklahoma Bird Range.

On 6 June, Murray Looney revisited the nest, finding it empty. He neither saw nor heard a towhee in the area. When the nest was collected on 6 August it appeared fresh and unused, containing none of the powdery duff that usually accumulates as the sheathing of the young birds' growing feathers dries and flakes off.

The two above-reported nests may well be the first of the Rufous-sided Towhee to have been discovered in Oklahoma. The "3 full grown young" seen on 9 June 1917 (no nest mentioned) by A. J. B. Kirn at Copan, in Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma (Nice, 1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, p. 179), presumably were fully feathered and out of the nest. The "set of 4 eggs" said to have been collected at Tulsa on 12 May 1922 by G. W. Morse (Nice, *loc. cit.*) may or may not have been of *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*, for many of Morse's identifications are questionable.

There have been a few additional sightings of the species in Oklahoma within the breeding season. All of these, with the one exception noted below, were in northeastern Oklahoma:

In 1921 L. B. Nice saw "several" Rufous-sided Towhees in Ottawa County on 12 June and in Delaware County on 15 June (Nice and Nice, 1924, *Birds of Oklahoma*, Univ. Oklahoma Bull., New Series No. 20, Univ. Studies No. 288, p. 76). Dr. Nice's itinerary was, according to a later publication (Nice, *op. cit.*, p. 45): "Miami, June 12; Salina, Spavinaw and Locust Grove, Mayes County, June 13-14; Jay and Grove, Delaware county, June 15-16."

For almost fifty years the species was not reported from anywhere in the state within its breeding season. Oklahoma's Breeding Bird Surveys (U.S. Dept. Interior, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Migratory Non-game

Bird Studies) have, however, brought to light the following four recent Rufous-sided Towhee sightings: one bird in Ottawa County on Route 22 near Peoria on 1 June 1968 (Dotty M. Goard); one on Route 23 in Craig County east of Welch on 30 May 1968 (Gene T. Hendricks); and two widely separated birds, each "spotted" and "with red eyes," on Route 19 in Dewey County west of Eagle City, in the northwestern part of the main body of the state, on 19 June 1971 (Robert T. Lynn). Though well within the breeding season, some or all of these sightings may represent exceptionally late migration.

In the three years during which my wife and I have lived in Delaware County (since August of 1975) we have observed very few towhees at any season. Summer and late spring sightings have indicated that the population occupying the brushy slopes above Spavinaw Creek north of Colcord is small and local. We visited the site of the 1977 nest on 29 April 1978 and neither saw nor heard a towhee on that date. Between 1 May and 18 June 1978, however, Mary Looney heard at least one towhee singing on at least four dates near her house, which is about half a mile northeast of the 1977 nest site and a quarter mile northwest of the 1978 nest site. On 10 June 1978, at about 0930, Mary Looney and I found a male and female towhee together in a shallow ravine in the same area. The female scolded vigorously before both birds flew off together.

Every bird that we have seen in northeastern Oklahoma in summer has been plain-backed rather than spotted-backed.

ROUTE 2, BOX 51A, JAY, OKLAHOMA 74356, 6 AUGUST 1978

A BROWN PELICAN IN CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

By BRAD CARLTON

At about 4 o'clock in the afternoon on 23 April 1976 (air temperature up to 62°F. by noon; southwest wind 10-15 mph), I was surprised to find no shorebirds at Prairie Dog Point on the west side of Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma. What I did find was six Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) standing at the water's edge with a large, dark, short-legged bird whose back was toward me and whose bill was tucked into its scapular plumage. As I approached the seven birds, the gulls flew off and the large bird lifted its head, revealing a massive bill and a pronounced pattern of dark-brown and white on the neck. Obviously it could be nothing but a Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), the first I had ever seen away from the ocean coast.

Immediately I drove home for my wife, Helen, for I wanted her to see the bird. At about 4:45 she, Henry Walter, and I returned to Prairie Dog Point, found the bird without trouble, and watched it for about 20 minutes. It would "spook" when approached to within about 100 feet, but after flying about for a while would return to the Point and settle down.

At 7 o'clock the following morning (air temperature 52°F.; north wind 20-30 mph), Wesley Isaacs and I failed to find the pelican at Prairie Dog Point, but we found it on the big impoundment's opposite side, at the tip of Gun Club

Point. This time it was resting with 30 Ring-billed Gulls, 14 Franklin's Gulls (*Larus pipixcan*), and eight Forster's Terns (*Sterna forsteri*). We saw it well. It appeared to be fully adult, for the patterning on its head and neck was very bold and its crest was plainly visible. When disturbed it flew off, flapping its wings steadily as it gained altitude, then soaring in wide circles over the lake.

On 25 April, Warren D. Harden and George M. Sutton drove over from Norman to see the bird and John S. Shackford tried to get a picture of it, but the light was poor for photography. Put to flight, the pelican circled high over the lake for a while, but returned to the Point and alighted not far from the spot at which it had been standing.

I watched the pelican on several occasions between 24 and 29 April. When approached too closely it would fly up, start circling over the lake, and rise higher and higher, at times being so far up that I could hardly see it even with my 8-power binocular, but invariably above the lake itself. Its technique in fishing astonished me: when as much as 80 feet up, it would suddenly fold its wings and shoot straight downward into the water. On 24 April I saw it make four dives in about 20 minutes. It seemed to be most successful in its fishing near the water-intake tower, where the water was roiled. I could not be sure, of course, of how many fish it was catching, but I estimated that about 20% of its dives were successful. The shortest dives that I saw it take were from about 60 feet up, the longest from about 100 feet up.

On 29 April I found the pelican at Prairie Dog Point — this time with a White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*). The two birds were about 20 yards apart, each standing in shallow water. The Brown Pelican was noticeably smaller than the White. Not far from the pelicans was a flock of 12 American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*), all resting at the water's edge.

On 30 April, John Shackford succeeded in obtaining the excellent photograph reproduced here. That day the White Pelican was close to a flock of gulls, most of them Franklin's.

The Brown Pelican was last seen on 5 May. That day Wesley Isaacs



PELICANS BROWN AND WHITE

Photographed by John S. Shackford on 30 April 1976 at Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Also showing in the picture are eight Franklin's Gulls and three Ring-billed Gulls.

watched it as it dived for fish near the Lake Hefner dam.

According to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, pp. 16-17), there have heretofore been seven valid records for the Brown Pelican in Oklahoma, the most recent of them being for 25 May 1955, on which date A. H. Radil shot an immature male bird (UOMZ 2316) at one of the fishery ponds at Reagan, Johnston County, south-central Oklahoma.

12000 ROYAL COACH DR., YUKON, OKLAHOMA 73099, 15 JULY 1978.

GENERAL NOTES

Peregrine Falcons sighted in Texas County, Oklahoma.—At about 1030 on 2 May 1978 (weather unseasonably wintry: sky heavily overcast; intermittent drizzle and sleet; north wind 25-40 kph; air temperature about 3°C.), at a sizeable playa known as Wild Horse Lake, 4.8 kilometers north of Straight, Texas County, northwestern Oklahoma, we saw two large falcons. One of them soon drifted out of sight, but the other continued to cruise about over the water perhaps 100 meters from us and 12 meters up, making short, half-hearted stoops at swimming ducks and chasing shorebirds as if "prey-testing" — i.e., looking for infirm individuals that would be easy to catch.

The falcon moved gradually closer to us, eventually flying directly overhead. With our binoculars we clearly saw the black of the moustachial streaks and top of the head, the blue-gray back, the barred breast and belly, and the barred rather than black axillary feathers. Our identification was positive: the bird was an adult male Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*). It moved northwestward, harrassing shorebirds as it went. On leaving the lake, it flew low over a wheatfield and we lost sight of it.

A few minutes later, as we were scanning lake and fields with our 15-45X spotting scope, a flock of Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*), followed closely by eight Green-winged Teal (*A. crecca*), flew erratically toward us from the north, as if in panic. Suddenly Gene Pester shouted, "It got one!" Glancing upward, we saw a Peregrine (very likely the bird we had been watching) clutching a teal in its talons. A small shower of feathers indicated that the catch had just been made. Falcon and prey were 50 meters from us, about 20 meters up.

The Peregrine flew laboriously southward toward shore. Through our binoculars we saw it bite, wrench, and break its prey's neck. When about half a kilometer south of the lake, it flew so low that we could not see it clearly. We did not see it alight.

About ten minutes later, while we were at the truck talking with the landowner, a falcon that we identified as another Peregrine flew toward us from the southeast, moving leisurely overhead about 10 meters up. This time the diagnostic characters were even more striking than those of the first bird. The falcon flew low over the wheat, heading northwestward, passing out of sight when about half a kilometer away.

Other birds than the Peregrines that we saw at Wild Horse Lake that morning were 13 Mallards, 40 Green-winged Teal, 91 Blue-winged Teal (*A. discors*), two Northern Shovelers (*A. clypeata*), 20 American Coots (*Fulica americana*), 15 Willets (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*), 18 Marbled Godwits (*Limosa fedoa*), some Wilson's Phalaropes (*Steganopus tricolor*), and small scolopacids of several species.

Later that day, while in the unfilled basin of Optima Reservoir, at a spot 4.8 kilometers east and 6.5 north of the town of Hardesty, we again saw a large falcon. It was flying so low that we could not see it clearly. After driving to higher ground we saw it again, this time at about 175 meters. We ascertained first that its axillars were not black, then that it was carrying prey. Presently it alighted on a mound about 250 meters from us and we had a good look at it through our spotting scope. It was an adult Peregrine, possibly one of the very birds we had seen at Wild Horse Lake, though that body of water was fully 25 kilometers away.

While the falcon was eating we drove to within about 150 meters of it. We now saw that its prey was a small bird. Disturbed by our presence, the falcon flew about 75 meters, alighted and resumed eating. Hoping to learn what it had caught, we drove quickly toward it, but when it flew it took its prey with it. Circling widely, it sped westward up the Beaver River and disappeared when about 300 meters from us.

We searched the two feeding sites, gathered an assortment of feathers — all of which proved to be from a Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) — and drove in the direction the falcon had taken. As we topped a rise, it flushed once more. Without its prey this time, it flew up the river and disappeared. We failed to find any feathers or bones at the spot from which it had flown.

Birds that we saw in the Optima Reservoir basin were Mallards, Pintails (*Anas acuta*), Green-winged and Blue-winged teal, Northern Shovelers, American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*), and various small charadriiform and passeriform species.

In our opinion, the weather may have had much to do with these unexpected Peregrine sightings. Many of the other migrant birds that we saw were sitting out the stiff north wind and cold temperatures as best they could. This unseasonable weather may well have been a deterrent to migration, causing the birds to stockpile, thus attracting predators also on migration.

Sutton (1974, Check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 11), who calls the Peregrine a "transient and winter visitant from 31 August to 26 May," does not name Texas County among the counties from which *Falco peregrinus* has been reported (1967, Oklahoma Birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 124).

We are grateful to Victor J. Heller, Graduate Research Assistant in Wildlife Ecology at Oklahoma State University, for identification of the Cliff Swallow feathers.—Mark E. Byard, Oklahoma Dept. Wildlife Conservation, 504 Foster, Ponca City, Oklahoma 74601; Ronald C. Freeman, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 135 Bel Air Circle, Brunswick, Georgia 31520; Gene A. Pester, Oklahoma Dept. Wildlife Conservation, 1311 N. Sunset, Guymon, Oklahoma 73942, 22 May 1978.

Breeding of King Rail in Washington County, Oklahoma.—Along a narrow drainage ditch that parallels a county road about 1 mile northwest of Dewey, Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma, the King Rail (*Rallus elegans*) has been seen repeatedly in summer during recent years. The ditch is sometimes full of water, sometimes dry, but by midsummer it is lined with sedge and grass up to 4 feet high, no matter how dry the season.

I first saw the King Rail there, an adult, on 23 July 1969. On 10 and 11 August 1970, I saw two young birds at a pond about half a mile southwest of the ditch. On 1 June 1971, Dotty M. Goard *et al.* flushed an adult bird along the ditch after hearing its calls. This year (1977) I first saw the species along the ditch on 23 June, when, hidden back of rank Johnson grass, I watched one parent bird preening its plumage while the other, accompanied by at least six chicks, fed on a mudflat. The chicks, about third-grown, were still covered with black down. They moved in and out among the sedge, on the go so incessantly that counting them was difficult. One chick, chasing an insect, ran with its "knees" close together and feet far apart, a movement handy for pushing vegetation aside, but ludicrous to behold when the bird was in the open.

I found King Rails along the ditch again on the morning of 1 July, observing first an adult as it walked out onto the road several yards from where I stood, then one of the fully feathered young ones, no longer black but dusky with whitish front, as it crossed the road.—Ella Delap, 409 N. Wyandotte, Dewey, Oklahoma 74029, 8 July 1977.

Nest of Lewis's Woodpecker in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.—Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*) is known to have bred "irregularly" in the Black Mesa country in the northwesternmost corner of Oklahoma's Panhandle (Sutton, 1974, Check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 24), but it has

never been common there. R. C. Tate (1923, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 3: 45) considered it a "not numerous" resident near Kenton, in Cimarron County. He found several nests, one of them on 19 June 1920, and Mrs. Nice herself watched "a pair at their nesting hole" on 31 May 1922 (Nice, 1931, The birds of Oklahoma, Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv., 3: 113). The species has been observed from time to time in the Black Mesa country in recent years, but so far as I know, no nest has been found since 1922.

On the evening of 8 August 1976, Henry N. Buscher and I watched four Lewis's Woodpeckers foraging together in a large elm along Texakeet Creek near the Laurance Regnier ranch-house 4 miles south of Kenton. We judged from their behavior that they were a family group and that nesting had taken place near by.

On the morning of 14 May 1978, while looking for birds with Laurence Dunn, Alice Brues, and several other members of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society in a grove of large cottonwoods near the confluence of Carrizzo Creek and the Cimarron River about 4 miles northeast of Kenton, I noticed two Lewis's Woodpeckers at a nest hole on the under side of a cottonwood limb about 23 feet up. The limb itself was dead, though the tree was alive. The birds remained close by while I climbed to the nest, but they did not seem to be much excited. The entrance to the nest cavity was about 2¾ inches in diameter. I could not get my hand through it. I did not hear sounds of young birds while I was at the nest.—Jack D. Tyler, *Dept. Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 21 July 1978.*

On abrasion of plumage in the Starling. Well known is the fact that the heavy speckling of the winter plumage of the Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) is lost not through molt but through abrasion. The grayish white and pale buffy tips of the feathers are obviously much more friable than the dark parts. Witherby *et al.* (1948, Handb. British birds, 1: 43) describe the breeding plumage thus: "SUMMER.—No moult. Buff and gray of tips of feathers gradually wear off, making the whole bird darker and more glossy, especially on crown and underparts."

On 26 February 1976, in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, I observed how certain Starling activities "gradually wear off" the light tips of the feathers. The weather had been unseasonably warm for weeks. At a slitlike natural cavity in an old maple across the street from my house on West Brooks Street, I saw a Starling emerge with a billful of debris. At first I thought there might be something edible in this, but the Starling flicked it off, wiped its bill vigorously, and went in after another load. The opening to the cavity was narrow, but the Starling managed to get in and out by squeezing and pushing at a point about midway between top and bottom. It worked hard, bringing out billful after billful. After removing about twenty loads, it found that it could get rid of the debris by sticking its head and the forepart of its body out without leaving the cavity, a procedure that necessitated backing up immediately after bill-wiping. Even from my position several rods away, I could see that this was hard on the plumage, especially that of the breast, belly, wings, and back.

In the midst of all this cavity-cleaning, another Starling happened by and the worker quickly emerged, dropped its load, wiped its bill hastily, flew to a twig a few feet away, and began waving its wings and calling. This behavior convinced me that the worker was a male, for I believe that female Starlings do not wing-wave. In this I may be wrong. February 26 certainly is early for nest-building.—George M. Sutton, *Stovall Museum of Science and History, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Okla. 73019, 29 February 1976.*

Early nest of Prothonotary Warbler in Washington County, Oklahoma.—In the Roy Quillin Bird Egg Collection at the Rob and Bessie Welder Wildlife Foundation at Sinton, Texas is a set of three eggs of the Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) collected 3 miles west of Copan, Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma on 3 May 1917 by Albert J. B. Kirn, early oologist and field naturalist. On the data slip for this set of eggs Kirn describes nest and site: "in stub of elm tree in wood near [Little Caney] river, two feet up; nest near top of stub in hole; of shreds of bark fibre, fine grasses and

lined with rootlets and long hair"; and he noted that the eggs were "fresh." Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 489) gives the earliest date for nesting in Oklahoma as "May 5, 1916, partly built nest, Washington County, A. J. B. Kirn (Nice, 1931: 155)." There is no way of knowing how Kirn overlooked this earlier nest when he sent his Copan records to Margaret Morse Nice.

Bent (1953, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 203: 31) quotes from a study by Meyer and Nevius (1943, Migrant, 14: 31-36) to the effect that at four nests of the Prothonotary Warbler in Tennessee "from 6 to 10 days were required for nest construction" and "from 3 to 5 days more elapsed before the first eggs were laid." Since *Protonotaria citrea* usually lays one egg each day (Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 23) the Oklahoma nest above-described must have reached the "partly built" stage at least nine days earlier than that referred to in Kirn's published record.—Emma H. Messerly, 344 S. E. Elmhurst, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74003, 13 July 1978.

Early spring record for Townsend's Warbler in Oklahoma.—At about 1600 on 28 April 1978 (a pleasant, comparatively windless day), I collected a male Townsend's Warbler (*Dendroica townsendi*) along the Cimarron River about 9 kilometers east of Kenton, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma. The area was heavily used by livestock. Among its trees were scattered large cottonwoods, some dense patches of hackberry, and a few clumps of salt cedar. Other parulids that I saw in the vicinity were many Yellow-rumped Warblers (*D. coronata*) — both white-throated and yellow-throated forms, some of the males singing — two Orange-crowned Warblers (*Vermivora celata*), and two Wilson's Warblers (*Wilsonia pusilla*). My specimen (UOMZ 13291) is the first adult male Townsend's Warbler to have been collected in Oklahoma. The species is listed as a "transient from August 31 to September 22 and from May 11 to 14" (Sutton, 1974, Check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 37). The earliest spring sighting heretofore on record is, according to data filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, of a female bird seen by John S. Weske along the Cimarron River east of Kenton on 11 May 1968. My specimen therefore represents return from the south about two weeks earlier than extant records have indicated.—D. Scott Wood, Dept. of Zoology and Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman 73019, 7 April 1979.

Prairie Warbler in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.—At about 0930 on 14 May 1978, John S. Tomer, Jerry Sisler, and I observed a male Prairie Warbler (*Dendroica discolor*) working its way among the vegetation along the roadside fence near the sewage treatment pond about a mile northeast of Boise City, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma. We watched it through both field glasses and telescopes. It was in full breeding plumage. We noted its striped face and sides, its chestnut back, and its "tail wagging." At 1130, Diane Lowe, John Shackford, and others observed it again in the same area. Shackford heard one feeble attempt at singing. Jack D. Tyler and several of his students tried to find it a bit later, but were unsuccessful.

Dendroica discolor breeds in eastern Oklahoma; it has not heretofore been reported from any area west of Garfield and Caddo counties (Sutton, 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, pp. 37-38).—Richard L. Reeder, Faculty of Natural Sciences, University of Tulsa, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74104, 8 August 1978.

FROM THE EDITOR: Joseph A. Grzybowski is to be thanked for his part in making the picture of the Rufous-sided Towhee's nest available for reproduction as a halftone in this issue.

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