

NESTING OF VERMILION FLYCATCHER
IN CIMARRON COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN S. TOMER

At 1030 on 8 May 1982, during a scheduled spring meeting of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society, Frances Peters, Mary Avolyn Johns, and Constance E. Taylor found a male Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) about 3 miles north and 1½ miles east of Kenton, Cimarron County, in far western Oklahoma. The bird was among cottonwood trees near the point at which North Carrizozo Creek joins the Cimarron River. At 1130 that same morning Dr. Taylor led John S. Shackford and me to the area. We looked in vain for a male bird, but did find a female. She was busy hawking for insects. Following her through the trees near the creek, we saw her fly to a medium-sized cottonwood and settle on her nest.



VERMILION FLYCATCHERS

Adult male with one of three young birds at first of two successful nests built in adjacent cottonwood trees along North Carrizozo Creek in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, during spring of 1982. Photo by Wesley S. Isaacs on 26 May 1982.

The nest was about 10 feet from the ground in a horizontal fork of a dead branch well out from the tree's main trunk. I photographed the nest and nest-site and noted carefully just where the nest-tree was. The woods were typical of that part of the State. Among the cottonwoods were scattered junipers, none of them very large. Near the streams grew intermittent stands of salt cedar (*Tamarix gallica*). So well hidden was the nest that we might never have found it had we not seen the bird go to it.

Later that day I returned with Warren D. Harden, Forrest S. Romero, and John F. Messerly to see the flycatchers. We saw both male and female birds. I climbed to the nest, finding that it contained three eggs. They were cream-colored, marked with thinly scattered rust-red dots and, chiefly at the larger end, with light gray splotches. Still later that afternoon, many persons who were attending the meeting came to see the flycatchers and their nest.

On 26 May, Wesley S. Isaacs photographed the male bird near the nest in which there were three chicks too young for banding, netted and banded the female bird, and photographed the female at the nest. On 11 June, John S.



The two Cimarron County nests of Vermilion Flycatcher found in the spring of 1982. Left - photo by Wesley S. Isaacs showing nest discovered on 8 May about 10 feet off the ground in a cottonwood; from this nest three young fledged. Right- photo by John S. Shackford of second nest discovered by him about 35 feet up in a nearby cottonwood on 11 June, 1982; this nest probably held eggs.

Shackford photographed the male parent and the three recently fledged chicks. He found the pair's second nest for the season, this one about 35 feet up and well concealed in the crotch of a live oblique limb in a nearby cottonwood and photographed the banded female on the nest, which probably held eggs.

The Vermilion Flycatcher was first recorded in Oklahoma on 21 September 1949 by A. M. Mery and his wife Sophia, who observed an adult male, an adult female, and a "duller bird, possibly an immature of the same species" at their home in the southeastern residential part of Tulsa, Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma; the Merys and "at least 50 members of the Tulsa Audubon Society and other ornithologists" saw the birds repeatedly thereabouts until 1 January 1950 (Baumgartner, F.M., 1950, Aud. Field Notes 4: 23, 209). Since 1950 the species has been recorded 27 times. It was first discovered nesting in May of 1955 in Major County, northwestern Oklahoma, by R. L. Downing. That nesting was unsuccessful, though the female built two nests, the second of which held eggs. A pair twice nested successfully in Lincoln County, central Oklahoma, in May and June 1960; Ruby E. Ray and W. Marvin Davis saw the nests (Sutton, G.M., 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 350), one of which has been preserved. The Cimarron County nesting reported above is, then, the third for the state.

5911 EAST 46TH STREET, TULSA, OKLAHOMA 74135, 15 AUGUST 1982.

GENERAL NOTES

Second specimen of American Black Duck from Comanche County, Oklahoma.—At the north end of Lake Lawtonka, 2 miles north of Medicine Park, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma, David Jameson, Randolph Rushing and I have a blind from which we shoot ducks. The area is ideal habitat for migrating waterfowl. The water is shallow. A profuse tangle of aquatic plants, notably smartweed (*Polygonum* sp.), pondweed (*Potamogeton* sp.), and water milfoil (*Myriophyllum* sp.), growing among scattered dead willow (*Salix* sp.) saplings, affords excellent food and cover. At about 0745 on 28 November 1976 (north wind gusting up to 25 m.p.h., temperature 20°F., ice up to 4 inches thick extending out from shore for 200 yards), I called two American Black Ducks (*Anas rubripes*) in to our decoys. As the birds bank in, I shot one of them. The specimen, a male, had red legs and feet and light olive-green bill. It is now a skin (CUMZ 686) in the collection of the Cameron University Museum of Zoology in Lawton.

Anas rubripes has been recorded in eastern and central Oklahoma from 20 September to 22 April; specimens from Osage, Payne, Oklahoma, Comanche, and Woods counties have been preserved (Sutton, G.M., 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 6). The first Comanche County specimen (UOMZ 8291) was collected by Frank Rush Sr. on 28 November 1914 from a flock of Mallards (*A. platyrhynchos*) in

the Wichita National Forest (now the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge). M. M. Nice (1931, *The birds of Oklahoma*, Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv. 3(1): 61) erred in naming E. D. Crabb as the collector of this specimen and in giving 1 December as the date. There are three other American Black Duck records for Comanche County: on 27 December 1941, a red-legged bird, probably an adult male, was trapped and banded at French Lake in the Wichita refuge and shot almost a year later (on 1 December 1942) near Headrick, Jackson County, Oklahoma, about 22 miles southwest of the refuge. Between November 1941 and January 1942 refuge personnel trapped and banded three others on the refuge (Holloran, A. F., 1968, Special Report No. 182, *Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge*). — Jack Carden, 1124 SW 45th St., Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 7 July, 1980.

Late fall sightings of Mississippi Kite.—Since moving to Oklahoma in July 1981 I have found the Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) to be common in summer at Fort Sill near Lawton, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. I have had many thrilling experiences with the birds near their roadside nest-trees. At 0600 on 17 October 1981, while driving northward along the crest of a knoll called Evans Knob on Fort Sill Boulevard, I saw two kites gracefully circling in tandem above the riparian woods below me. They did not appear to be hunting for food or chasing each other. They moved in unison, executing spectacular maneuvers, almost as if courting. It occurred to me as I watched them that the date might be late for the species since I had not been seeing much of it earlier in the month.

G. M. Sutton (1974, *A check-list of Oklahoma birds*, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 9) gives 7 October as the latest fall date for the Mississippi Kite in Oklahoma. J. K. DeVore (1977, *Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc.* 10:31-32) observed five of the kites at Edmond, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, on 28 October 1975. The latest date given by J. D. Tyler (1979, *Birds of southwestern Oklahoma*, Stovall Mus. Contr. 2, p. 16) is 12 October, on which date in 1967 Martha Ikard and Anne Engles saw a single kite 3½ miles west of Duncan in Stephens County. The Sutton Summary of Records at the Stovall Museum's Bird Range lists valid sightings for October in Harmon, Woods, Alfalfa, Payne and Washington counties. — Kevin Mason, 7506 Morrocco Drive, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 15 July 1982.

Spotted Sandpiper chick caught in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.—On 14 June 1980, at Lake Etling in Black Mesa State Park, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma, I caught a downy chick Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*) that I believe was only a day or two old. I found it about 200 yards east of the park ranger's station in a place that is usually lake bottom but that, owing to a lowering of the lake's water level, had become a sandy bank of the main tributary stream. I put the chick into an empty opened suitcase, hoping that a parent bird would come close enough for a

photograph showing both adult and chick. One excited adult, uttering typically shrill callnotes, ran about not far away and occasionally hovered a few feet above the chick, but I took no picture.

At least four adult Spotted Sandpipers were in this area on 14 June. On the preceding day I had seen two adults about a quarter of a mile northward along the lake shore.

Actitis macularia may breed fairly regularly in the Oklahoma Panhandle. R. Crompton Tate found two nests, each with three young, near Kenton in 1910 and 1911, respectively (Nice, M.M., 1931, The birds of Oklahoma, Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv. 3(1):91). More recently a downy chick (UOMZ 13466) was collected below the dam of the partly filled Optima Reservoir in Texas County near Hardesty on 16 July 1978 (Ports, M., 1979, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 12:20-21).—John S. Shackford, Rt. 1, Box 125, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73111, 23 June 1980.

Rufous Hummingbird in Muskogee County, Oklahoma.—From 10 October to 3 December 1981 a Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) visited feeders in the specially landscaped, bird-oriented yard of Dr. Charles Wallis and his wife Verla in Fort Gibson, Muskogee County, east-central Oklahoma. The several members of the Indian Nations Audubon Society who saw the bird (often at close range) believed it to be an immature male. Its most noticeable features were its bright brown tail, its buffy sides and flanks, and the cluster of iridescent orange spots on its lower throat. I watched the bird on several occasions, especially on 23 November. The weather was mild throughout the period.

Only once heretofore has *Selasphorus rufus* been reported from far eastern Oklahoma: on 9 August 1980, A. Marguerite Baumgartner caught and banded a female bird near Jay, Delaware County (Williams, F., 1980, Am. Birds 34: 909). Also to be noted is the fact that a single Rufous Hummingbird lingered in Bartlesville, Washington County, from mid-October 1974 to 26 January 1975 (Goard, D. M., 1975, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 8: 36-37).—Jeri McMahon, Route 2, Box 908, Fort Gibson, Oklahoma 74434, 1 February 1982.

Possible sighting of Gray Jay in Oklahoma. — At about 0800 on 8 March 1980, while looking for birds along the Cimarron River at a spot known locally as Watson's Crossing, about 6 miles east of Kenton, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma, I watched for about 15 minutes what I finally decided could be nothing but a Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*). This species was formerly called the Canada Jay in birdbooks and is widely known amongst lumberjacks and trappers as the Whiskey Jack or Camp Robber.

The bird was perched atop a cottonwood not far from the river. At first I thought it was a Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), for it was middle-sized, gray, fairly long-tailed, and more or less white-headed. It did not, however, seem quite white enough on the underparts for a shrike of any sort.

Presently it began "fluting" in a way that called to mind a Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*), though the notes were different in tone from those of that species, and not quite so loud. When the "fluting" changed to a scold, the syllables sounded like *creep, creep, creep*.

Looking closely through my binocular, I saw that there seemed to be no black or white in the wings or tail, that the forepart of the head was white, and that the only black anywhere seemed to be on the head, back of and above the eye. The bill was conical, rather short, black, and shiny. To my surprise the bird continued to perch on the same branch in the very top of the cottonwood. When finally it flew downward, it gave chase to a Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*). I last saw the jay moving off among the salt cedars (*Tamarix gallica*), not far above the ground.

In the opinion of George M. Sutton, the bird was probably an immature individual of the montane race *Perisoreus canadensis capitalis*, a form that is common in the mountains of Colorado and northern New Mexico, and one that was sometimes called the Rocky Mountain Jay (see Bailey, F. M., 1902, Handbook of birds of the western United States, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston and New York, p. 277). *Perisoreus canadensis* has not heretofore been reported from any part of Oklahoma. — Thomas L. Flowers, Box 864, Boise City, Oklahoma 73933, 20 March 1980.

Late departure date for Sprague's Pipit in Oklahoma. — On 1 May 1982, while walking across an abandoned turf farm 5 miles northwest of Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, I flushed a Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*). As the bird flew high, I heard its diagnostic "cheeh" and "cheeh-cheeh" calls and clearly observed the white outer feathers of its tail. After hanging momentarily in air, it then plummeted downward on folded wings, opening them again the last instant before touching ground. The pipit alighted in a patch of grass too dense for me to see it. I flushed it several more times, during the last of which it maintained its altitude for several minutes before dropping into a far corner of the field.

I observed a flock of about 10 Water Pipits (*A. spinoletta*) in one of the more sparsely vegetated stretches of turf. Temporary rain pools nearby contained a few Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*), Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*), and Franklin's Gulls (*Larus pipixcan*). Several Upland Sandpipers (*Bartramia longicauda*) were scattered about the field.

G. M. Sutton (1974, A checklist of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 33) gives 23 April as the latest date in spring for Sprague's Pipit in Oklahoma. On the same day as my sighting, seven Sprague's Pipits were also seen on the Attwater's Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge in southern coastal Texas (Arvin, J. C., 1982, Am. Birds 36:873). — Joseph A. Grzybowski, Department of Zoology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73019, 14 December 1982.

Green-tailed Towhee nest in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. — On 8 May 1982, a hot sunny day, I discovered the nest of a Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*) in the concrete bricabrac wall of a restroom in Black Mesa State Park, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma. The nest held three eggs.

I first saw one of the towhees that day while sitting on a bluff behind the park cabins that overlooks Lake Etling. All at once, and greatly to my surprise, the towhee alighted briefly within about 3 feet of me on a large boulder. The light was good, so I had a fine look at the greenish tone of its upperparts and the pure white of its throat. Convinced that I had seen a Green-tailed Towhee, I found my brother David, told him of the bird, and returned with him to the spot at which I had seen it. For quite a while we waited there, but no towhee appeared.

Disappointed, we watched two Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) as they flew above the shore of Lake Etling. We were wondering where their nest might be when suddenly, a towhee-sized bird flounced into sight below us, alighted briefly on the ground, flew to an opening about 5 feet up in the concrete wall of the restroom, and disappeared. Suspecting that a nest might be there, we investigated, and out from its nest flew a Green-tailed Towhee. We followed the bird for about a quarter of an hour, assured ourselves that we had identified it correctly, and decided not to disturb it further.

Later in the day we returned to the restroom and saw one of the birds, but it did not go to the nest. That evening I approached the nest cautiously and saw a towhee on it. Bird and nest were in shadow and hard to see. I used a small mirror in determining that it held three eggs.

Jack D. Tyler also saw the nest that day and the three eggs that were in it. The birds deserted the nest, probably because of the continuous use of the restroom. John S. Shackford collected the nest and one egg near the end of the month and took it to George M. Sutton, who prepared the egg as a specimen. The nest was well built. Its cup was fully 3 inches deep. The egg was that of a Green-tailed Towhee, not of a Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*).

Pipilo chlorurus has heretofore been recorded in Oklahoma from 17 September to 8 November in the fall and from 8 April to 30 May in spring, with midsummer sightings of a single bird in Kiowa County on 16 and 17 July 1968 (Sutton Summary of Records on file at Stovall Museum, University of Oklahoma, Norman). There is one winter record: from 18 December 1971 to 1 March 1972, one was seen repeatedly in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma (Shackford, J. S., 1972, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 5:25-26). — Jeffrey Downs, 222 Graham Ave., Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73127, 3 August 1982.

Third Black-throated Sparrow record for central Oklahoma. — From 17 March to 28 April 1982, a Black-throated Sparrow (*Amphispiza bilineata*) fed repeatedly on and near a pile of wheat in a driveway on the Allen

Stroud ranch 10 miles west of Okarche, Canadian County, central Oklahoma. Other birds seen feeding there were House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*), Harris' Sparrows (*Zonotrichia querula*), Tree Sparrows (*Spizella arborea*), Field Sparrows (*S. pusilla*), Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), Common Grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*), and Western Meadowlarks (*Sturnella neglecta*). The surrounding semi-arid habitat in which mesquite, prickly-pear cactus, grama grasses, and buffalo grass all thrive has been receiving my special attention since the Ladder-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides scalaris*) was found nesting there.

On 18 March I photographed the Black-throated Sparrow as it fed on the wheat. On 20 March, with the help of Patricia Muzny, Brian Muzny, Warren D. Harden, Wade Harden, John G. Newell, and Christopher Mountford, I netted, banded (1590-88302), photographed, and released the bird.

Amphispiza bilineata breeds in the Black Mesa country at the northwestern corner of the Oklahoma Panhandle. It is believed to be a resident in that area, though it has been sighted there only a few times in winter. It has heretofore been recorded only three times in Oklahoma in the vast area stretching eastward from the Black Mesa country: on 27 October 1956, at Lake Dahlgren, near Lexington, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, a molting immature male specimen (UOMZ 2768) was collected; on 5 March 1972, one was netted and banded 3 miles south of Lugert, Kiowa County, southwestern Oklahoma (Van Velzen, W. T., 1968, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 1:26); from 28 January to 16 April 1980, one was observed and well photographed in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County (Isaacs, W. S., 1980, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 13:34). — John S. Shackford, *Route 1, Box 125, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73111, 24 March 1982.*

FROM THE EDITOR: The inscription in a little Oklahoma girl's *Fifty common birds of Oklahoma* reads: "When next you see a Harris's Sparrow, tell it you know the man who discovered its nest on the west coast of Hudson Bay, 'way back in 1931." And know him we did. His exciting, unique style of writing captivated our imaginations as it zestfully recounted all those wonderful adventures with his beloved birds. His many books allowed us vicarious visits to far-flung and little-known places like Baffin Island, Gomez Farias, Iceland, San Luis Potosí, Churchill, the Labrador Coast, and the Rio Sabinas. His direct-from-life paintings were not only vivid, imaginative, and inspiring, but also were uncommonly accurate portrayals of living creatures. His indomitable spirit touched our lives with sensitivity and with encouragement. But more importantly, he was our friend . . . George Miksch Sutton: 1898-1982.—Jack D. Tyler.

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