

BLACK-SHOULDERED KITE IN OKLAHOMA: 1860 and 1982

BY WILLIAM A. CARTER AND CHARLES L. FOWLER

On 1 July 1982 at 0945 (CDT), as we were finishing the final stop of 50 on a Breeding Bird Survey sponsored by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Oklahoma Route 002, Blanco) in southeastern Latimer County, southeastern Oklahoma, a gull-like bird hovering over a woodland edge caught our attention. Atop the bend of each wing a patch of black was conspicuous, but the remainder of the plumage — head, underparts, back, and tail — was white. We watched the bird for 20 minutes alternately perch in dead branches atop a large tree, sally out short distances and return, or hover over an open meadow nearby. We felt certain that the bird was a Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*, formerly called White-tailed Kite) a species which we had frequent-



BLACK-SHOULDERED KITE

Adult photographed by John S. Shackford on 20 July 1982 near its nest in Latimer County, Oklahoma.

ly encountered in Colima and Jalisco, Mexico in June and July of 1975.

John S. Shackford, John S. Tomer and Carter returned to the site on 4 July at 1330 and almost immediately spotted an adult kite. After about 20 minutes, another kite suddenly sailed into view. While both kites sat quietly in the top of a huge tree, we approached to within 100 yards of them. Suspecting that they had a nest, we began to search for it in trees nearby, with both kites circling not far above our heads all the while. Having failed to locate a nest, we concealed ourselves behind some woody underbrush not far away where we could observe the perch-tree. Presently, both kites returned to it and sat quietly for several minutes. Soon they began making brief sorties out over the open grasslands adjacent the timber, but always returned to the big tree. After 15 minutes or so the (presumed) female flew from the perch-tree to a dead snag, clutching in her talons an animal about the size of a cotton rat (*Sigmodon hispidus*). She bit at this prey for a few minutes, then picked it up and winged her way directly into the woods. We followed as quickly as we could and flushed the kite from its bulky nest approximately 50 feet up in a shortleaf pine (*Pinus echinata*) that was about 65 feet tall. On 9 July, Shackford, Carter and William G. Voelker returned. Voelker climbed to the nest and found three young birds that he estimated were at least 14 days old.

Voelker again visited the nest on 20 July and banded all three chicks. Both adults were near the nest. As he was leaving, he noticed still another Black-shouldered Kite circling far to the north. After carefully watching this bird, he located a second nest about two miles northeast of the first. Voelker climbed to this nest and banded its two young, which were approximately the same age as those banded earlier. At this nest, however, Voelker did not see a second adult kite.

From late July until 3 October, several other persons observed the kites. The following observations are noteworthy: in the environs of the second nest, Shackford and Carter on 2 and 3 August could find only one immature kite (breast streaked with brown; plumage generally duskier than adult's) and as it soared over, they could see that it had no band. Intensive searches in both nest areas failed to turn up a single adult bird. Conceivably, this young kite might have been hatched by a third pair not found earlier, but also might have also fledged from an earlier nesting at one of the two known nests. The species is known to sometimes be double brooded and incubation and fledging periods together require only about nine to ten weeks (Brown, L., and D. Amadon, 1968, *Eagles, hawks and falcons of the world*, Vol. 1, McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York, pp. 238, 240). However, this young bird could have lost its band or may have wandered into the area from Texas or Arkansas.

On 24 and 25 September, Shackford and Carter found at least five kites about 1½ miles east of the nest areas, but were unable to determine the age of all of them (although at least one was immature and two were adults) or whether any were banded. These birds were cruising over open grasslands next to a forest of mixed hardwoods.

Shackford and several Oklahoma City Audubon Society members saw a total of six kites in the same area on 2 October, but could locate only four of them the next morning. These observers were likewise unable to determine much about age or banding condition. In succeeding days, several other people tried to find the kites, but none was seen after 3 October. The open grassy stretches over which the kites hunted for food are projected to be inundated by Sardis Lake, a Corps of Engineers flood control project within the Jackfork Creek Basin.

Astoundingly, the only other record of *Elanus caeruleus* in Oklahoma was in 1860 (M. M. Nice, 1931, *The birds of Oklahoma*, Rev. ed., Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv. 3(1):70). Nice stated: "Formerly a rare summer resident . . . It is strange that this specimen of a breeding bird and her eggs should be the only record of the occurrence of this bird in Oklahoma. One of the eggs was chosen as the type specimen." The specimens, an adult female (USNM 17306) and her clutch of four eggs (USNM 2927) were collected on 9 May, 1860 by Charles S. McCarthy and James H. Clark about 25 miles from Fort Arbuckle in the Chickasaw Nation (not Choctaw Nation as reported incorrectly by G. M. Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 96), Indian Territory.

Black shouldered Kite population changes and range expansion in North and Middle America have been documented by E. Eisenmann (1971, *Am. Birds* 25:529-536) and updated by S. G. Pruett-Jones *et al.* (1980, *Am. Birds* 34:682-688) and D. Larson (1980, *Am. Birds* 34:689-690). The numbers of kites observed during the National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Counts in Texas the past few years (from *Am. Birds*) were: 1976-98 kites (10 different counts), 1977-201 kites (20 CBC's), 1978-210 kites (15 CBC's), 1979-209 kites (18 CBC's), 1980-232 kites (19 CBC's), and 1981-200 kites (16 CBC's). Sightings were reported during 1981 in Arkansas (Imhof, T. A., 1981, *Am. Birds* 35:832), Indiana (Peterjohn, B. G., 1981, *Am. Birds* 35:829), and Nebraska (Williams, F., 1982, *Am. Birds* 36:192).

The American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) Committee on Classification and Nomenclature now considers the White-tailed Kite, *E. leucurus*, conspecific with *E. caeruleus* of the Old World (1982, Thirty-fourth supplement to the AOU check-list of North American birds, *Suppl. to Auk* 99(3):4CC). Because *caeruleus* is the older species name, *leucurus* is no longer valid and the English name — White-tailed Kite — was changed to Black-shouldered Kite by the AOU Committee.

EAST CENTRAL UNIVERSITY BIOLOGY DEPARTMENT AND CROSSTIMBERS RANCH, ROUTE 7, BOX 394,
ADA, OKLAHOMA 74820, 17 FEBRUARY 1983.

FIRST NEST OF RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH IN OKLAHOMA

BY A. MARGUERITE BAUMGARTNER

The Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*) breeds in the pine and spruce forests of the North, south at higher elevations in the Rocky Mountains to New Mexico and to eastern Tennessee in the Appalachians (American Ornithologists' Union, 1957, Check-list of North American birds, p. 399). R. J. Gress (1982, Kansas Ornith. Soc. Bull. 33:37-39) reported nesting in Wichita, Sedgwick County, south-central Kansas in the spring of 1982.

G. M. Sutton (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 30) recorded dates of occurrence in the main body of the state spanning the period 13 September to 13 May. In the Black Mesa country of far western Oklahoma, the Red-breast has been observed as early as 9 August.

V. J. Vacin (1972, Bull. Oklahoma Ornith. Soc. 5:13-14) reported a probable nesting at his home on Silver Lake in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma. From 18 to 23 June he saw a male and female bird in company with two pale nuthatches that "looked young". These latter individuals fluttered their wings until the female fed them suet from a nearby feeder. Vacin was never able to locate a nest.



YOUNG RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH

Apparently the only one from a clutch of four eggs to survive, and the first of its species definitely known to have fledged in Oklahoma. Photographed 11 May 1981 by Jack P. Barrett in his yard in Ponca City, Oklahoma.

In the spring of 1981 Jack P. Barrett photographed a nest and a young Red-breasted Nuthatch incapable of sustained flight (photo above) in his yard in Ponca City, Kay County, north-central Oklahoma. At his request, I have prepared the following summary from his extensive field notes.

Throughout the winter of 1980-81 Barrett observed both a dark male and a pale female bird feeding in the yard regularly. In early April they began investigating a wren box beside the house, about 10 feet off the ground and three feet from the edge of a patio. The entrance hole was adequate for the female, but too small for the male. Barrett enlarged the hole twice, and on 4 April the pair began nest-building activities. Through April and May he recorded his observations, usually made in the early evening, but often in the morning also.

From 4-7 April, both birds participated in nest building, bringing bits of soft plant fibers and grass clippings to the nest-box. The male made repeated trips (as many as 14 in a single half-hour period on 7 April) to the conifers across the road, returning with pitch which he smeared around the entrance hole. During this time he frequently visited the female at the nest-box, sometimes with, oftentimes without, food for his mate. On occasion, he sang exuberantly. The female was inconspicuous after the first day, spending most of her time in the box, pulling in and arranging the grasses brought by her mate. She left the box infrequently and then only for brief periods. While she was absent, the male remained near the nest-box. On 6 and 11 April a third Red-breasted Nuthatch visited the nest area, but the male promptly drove it away. Barrett checked the nest on 16 April while both birds were gone and found four eggs.

On 26 April the behavior of both nuthatches changed dramatically. Between 1653 and 2002 CDT both were carrying food to the nest-box. The female usually departed before the male arrived but sometimes he entered the nest-box before she left. Occasionally he brought a morsel to her, which she fed to a chick or promptly ate. Near dusk the male resumed his ritual of smearing pitch. Activities ceased at 2002, when the female entered and the male left.

Between 1800 and 2000 on 27 April the female made 18 visits to the nest-box, but the male was not observed then or thereafter. On 28 April, from 0915 to 0922, the female made 11 trips to the box with food, and between 1819 and 2003, 18 trips, finally settling for the night at 1948. The following morning Barrett checked the nest-box again and found two small chicks and two eggs.

Between 29 April and 10 May Barrett took many pictures of the nest and its contents. On 10 May, even though the young birds were calling persistently, the female failed to return to the nest-box after 1600. At 0900 the following morning, she had still not reappeared. One of the chicks was perched in the entrance hole, calling continuously. At 0906 the stub-tailed young nuthatch sprang from the box and landed, practically at Barrett's feet. Barrett checked the nest-box; it was empty. He meticulously tended the young nuthatch until it was able to fly, and on 23 June brought it to me at our sanctuary near Jay in Delaware County, northeastern Oklahoma, and I banded it (no. 1590-49552). On the morning of 27 June, as I was pushing a water pan through the cage door, the young nuthatch suddenly darted out, disappearing among some pines along the roadside. We heard it calling most of the day, but have neither seen nor heard it since.

LITTLE LEWIS WHIRLWIND NATURE SCHOOL AND SANCTUARY, JAY OKLAHOMA, 74346. 12 NOV. 1981.

GENERAL NOTES

Possible courtship feeding of Yellow-billed Cuckoo. — The Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) is common in summer in Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma, especially on and near the Oxley Nature Center in Mohawk Park in Tulsa. No one has, however, found a nest in that wooded area at all recently so far as I know.

On 7 May 1979 I observed two of the cuckoos in what has traditionally been called "courtship feeding" behavior (see Lack, D., 1940, *Auk* 57:169-178) in Mohawk Park. The two were in a large dead elm (*Ulmus* sp.) that stood on the east dike of Lake Yahola. I was attracted to them by the call of the male. As I watched him I saw what I came to realize was his mate about 15 feet from him in the same tree. As the male called, his mate responded by bowing her head, drooping and fluttering her wings, and raising and lowering her tail. I thought I heard her give a short, soft *kow* note, but I could not be sure about this. I watched this call-and-response cycle five times within about ten minutes.

Hoping to photograph the female in her response attitude, which I had never before observed, I focused my camera on her and waited. Presently the male flew to her, mounted her briefly, and alighted close by. I photographed the two of them. The male remained with the female for about five seconds, whereupon they both flew off. Whether or not the mounting that I had observed was successful copulation I could not say. Not until I examined the photograph carefully did I realize that the male had in his beak a green caterpillar that he may have given his mate during coition. S. W. Eaton (1979, *Wilson Bull.* 91:154-155) described a similar instance of precopulatory behavior in this species in New York, but did not observe feeding. J. C. Welty (1975, *The life of birds*, 2nd ed., W. B. Saunders Co., Philadelphia, p. 263) states: ". . . courtship feeding is associated with coition and may function as a releaser for that behavior . . . it occurs during copulation in the Yellow-billed Cuckoo . . ." — Robert G. Jennings, *Oxley Nature Center, 200 Civic Center, Room 642, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74103, 23 July 1982.*

Rufous Hummingbird records for Comanche County, Oklahoma. — At about 0830 on the heavily overcast day of 6 October 1977, a brownish hummingbird attempting to drink at our feeder was driven off repeatedly by a female hummingbird, probably a Ruby-throat (*Archilochus colubris*), the only other species seen that summer in our yard in Lawton, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. Its brown color and high, sharp, fussing sounds attracted attention. For 15 minutes Cindy Felis and I observed the moot bird closely as it continued to fight with the other bird around the feeder about 24 inches from our patio door. The tail of the puzzling bird was rust-colored at its base, darker distally, and the corners were white. Its rusty-brown back showed a touch of green at the shoulders, and its forehead was a darker green. As it perched briefly in a redbud tree (*Cercis canadensis*) nearby, we could see several dark streaks on its throat, and near the chest a small area of bright orange-rust. Its dark rufous flanks contrasted sharply with the white of the

stomach. We identified the bird as an immature male Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*; see Williams, F., 1978, Amer. Birds 32:225).

At about 0700 on 6 August 1980 there appeared at this same feeder a Rufous Hummingbird closely resembling the one described above. Esther Beavers and I watched for about an hour as it caught insects and perched on a telephone wire between feeding flights. Through binoculars we discerned its white postocular spot, dark cheeks, green head and nape, and rusty back. It was still "hawking" insects at 1930 as my husband Louis and I watched from a distance of about 15 feet. Small irregular dark spots on the throat, the greenish cheeks, and a thin "eyebrow" of gold-brown feathers all were apparent. Early the next morning we watched the hummingbird try to drink from the feeder, but it was chased off each time by other hummingbirds. Only when it was catching insects did the other birds ignore it. Having read of the pugnacity of this species (Bent, A. C., 1940, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 176:404), I was surprised that the other hummingbirds could drive it away from our feeder.

Photos of a possible Rufous Hummingbird that came to our feeder on 4 September 1980 show a ventral view of the spread white-tipped tail feathers, each of which has a dark band distal to its rufous base. The flanks and axillars are pale buff. No rusty shading appeared on this bird's back as we watched it. Probably this same individual flew into a mist net in our backyard two days later (6 September). It quickly freed itself and flew off before we could obtain a photograph, but we examined it closely enough to ascertain that it was a female Rufous Hummingbird (Williams, F., 1981, Amer. Birds 35:200).

On 14 August 1981 an adult male Rufous Hummingbird, its bronze-gold head, nape and back brilliant in the sunlight, perched briefly in the top of a mimosa tree (*Albizia julibrissin*) in our backyard (Williams, F., 1982, Amer. Birds 36:193). On 7 August 1982, an immature male appeared near a ground-level bird bath where it battled a male and female Ruby-throat before giving up and flying away.

Selasphorus rufus migrates northward mainly along the Pacific Coast and breeds in the Pacific Northwest States but has been reported in Oklahoma from Cimarron, Texas, Oklahoma, Cleveland, Tulsa and Washington counties (Sutton, G. M., 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 23). There are sight records also for Rogers (Williams, F., 1978, Amer. Birds 32:225), Delaware (Williams, F., 1980, Amer. Birds 34:909), and Muskogee (Williams, F., 1982, Amer. Birds 36:193) counties.

Virtually all Oklahoma records have been in fall, a few birds overwintering. It appears that at least a few south-bound individuals regularly spill over onto the western Great Plains from their traditional route through the Rocky Mountains. In Texas, it is a regular fall migrant through western sections and the Panhandle, and along the Coast frequently occurs in fall, occasionally in winter (Peterson, R. T., 1960, A field guide to the birds of Texas, Houghton-Mifflin Co., Boston, p. 139). — Janet M. McGee, 1703 NW 43rd, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 21 February 1983.

Great-tailed Grackle breeding in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.—The main thrust of the spectacular range-expansion of the Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) into and through Oklahoma since the summer of 1953 has been northward (see Davis, 1975, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 8: 9-18). Recently, however, perhaps because of the scarcity of acceptable spots for nesting, the spread has been eastward and westward (see Pruitt, J., and N. McGowan, 1975, Am. Birds 29:985-992). Be this as it may, in the summer of 1978 I found two Great-tailed Grackle nests, one on 6 June, the other the following day, not far apart along the edge of a thick stand of cattails (*Typha latifolia*) at one of several sewage ponds 1 mile northeast of Bose City, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma. The cattail stand was roughly rectangular, measuring about 50 x 100 feet.

Each nest was fastened to cattail stalks about 2½ feet above water a bit less than 3 feet deep. Each held four eggs whose pale blue ground-color was obscured by a profusion of purplish, gray, and brown markings. Both nests and eggs were similar to those with which I had become familiar at Rose Lake in Canadian County, central Oklahoma, in the summers of 1975 and 1976. I made a point of noting that there were only two pairs of the big grackles at the sewage ponds, so presumably I found the nest of each pair. *Quiscalus mexicanus* has not, so far as I know, been found nesting heretofore anywhere in the Oklahoma Panhandle. To be noted is the fact that it is not known to have nested among the cattails at Lake Etling, an impoundment about 25 miles west of Boise City in Black Mesa State Park. — John S. Shackford, *Route 1, Box 125, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73111, 21 March 1980.*

FROM THE EDITOR: William G. Voelker, who twice travelled to Oklahoma from his home in Millstadt, Illinois, is to be thanked for his help with banding and photographing Oklahoma's first Black-shouldered Kites in 122 years. — Jack D. Tyler.

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