Bulletin of the

OKLAHOMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Vol. XVII March, 1984 No. 1

THE RED-BELLIED WOODPECKERS FAIL AGAIN

BY GEORGE M. SUTTON

The Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) inhabits virtually all wooded parts of Oklahoma. Even in the Black Mesa country, within a few miles of the New Mexico state line, it has nested successfully at least once (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 305). The Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), a hardy and aggressive species that often nests in woodpecker holes, also breeds statewide. According to my observations since the summer of 1951, the Red-bellied Woodpecker is among Oklahoma birds that may be in danger of local extirpation as a direct result of the Starling's unremitting piracy.

In the spring and summer of 1980, in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, I witnessed the failure of a pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers to rear a brood. Their first nest-hole, started in late April, was about 15 feet up in one of four old, partly dead maple trees growing not far apart just across the street from my house in a residential part of the city. While the pair were at work, Starlings bothered them constantly, sometimes forcing them to leave the tree. The woodpeckers stopped digging when the hole was about half finished. I am not sure

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER AND STARLING

Starling has usurped the scolding male Red-belly's partially excavated nest-hole. Photo taken in Guthrie, Logan County, Oklahoma, by John S. Shackford on 14 April 1983.

that the Starlings were the sole cause of desertion. On 1 May I saw a Common Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) fly from a low part of the nest-tree. By that date, the Red-bellies might already have deserted. Never did I observe a Starling actually entering or coming out of the hole on 1 May or thereafter.

The woodpeckers' second hole, about 25 feet up in another of the old maples, they dug during the first half of May. Both male and female worked at it. The male often called *creer* when he was not at work. So far as I know, the female never gave that call. The pair were so busy with their excavating that I wondered when they were finding anything to eat. Again two or three Starlings hung around as if waiting for the hole to be finished. By this time at least three pairs of Starlings were nesting in the maples — two pairs in fairly large natural cavities, one pair in an old woodpecker hole.

The Red-bellies deserted this second nest-hole shortly after mid-May. I am not sure that it was finished when the Starlings took it and I am not sure that the Starlings raised young in it. I did not spend much time watching the birds, so cannot say how much fighting went on. Under one of those very maples, on 23 April 1959, I had rescued a flicker by driving its Starling assailant off. The flicker was on the ground "on its back with wings spread wide — and a Starling was on top of it. The Starling was pecking savagely and would, I believe, have killed the flicker had I not intervened" (Sutton, *op. cit.*, p. 467).

After the Red-bellies lost their second nest-hole, I expected them to leave the neighborhood, but every day I continued to hear the *creer* callnote, so I knew that at least one of the pair was frequenting the old maples. Occasionally I had a good look at the male as he perched on a telephone pole at the northeast corner of my yard or flew to a dead tree about a hundred yards away. So infrequently did I see the female that I thought she had left the area or been killed.

On 12 June I watched the male for some time, hoping to see his mate. I saw no female bird that day, but during the following week I so often heard the *creer* call that I felt sure the pair had settled themselves for the season. Finally I found the third nest-hole, which was in another of the old maples about 20 feet up. Once I had located it, I learned that the woodpeckers never left it for long. From the thick scattering of fresh chips on the ground I surmised that the hole had been completed, but I did not know whether eggs had been laid. The several Starlings of the immediate vicinity were so busy carrying food to young that they seemed to be paying no attention to the woodpeckers. Not once while I watched the nest-hole for 15-minute periods that day and the next did I see a Starling looking into the hole or trying to enter it. Nor did I see either woodpecker chasing a Starling off.

By mid-June the four maples were fairly alive with Starlings. At least five pairs of adults were busy carrying food, some of which they gave to young out of nests. The two woodpeckers were there too, but they were decidedly inconspicuous. They stayed at or close to the nest-hole much of the time.

From 15 to 18 June, whenever I made a point of watching the woodpeckers' nest-hole, the pair almost never left it. The male called *creer* occasionally. Never did I hear him or his mate give the barking note *chiv*. I saw much more of the male than of the female. I did not know what was in the nest, but noted that

when the birds looked in or entered they seemed to have no food in their bills. On the whole the weather was so warm during the middle of the day that the eggs may not have needed constant brooding.

On 17 June, Stephen Sisney of *The Norman Transcript* took color photographs of the two woodpeckers. That day each bird stuck its head into the nest-hole repeatedly, as if checking the cavity's contents. Each also went in, disappearing momentarily, then sticking its head out and looking around. The male seemed to be much more excitable and apprehensive than the female. I felt sure that neither bird was taking food to the nest. I surmised that eggs had been laid and were being incubated.

At 0700 on 21 June neither woodpecker was in sight anywhere, but within about 6 feet of the nest's entrance were five adult Starlings, all of them apparently idling. Their presence surprised me, for I had supposed that all adult Starlings of the neighborhood were busy feeding young. Even as I wondered whether the woodpeckers had deserted their nest, the male Red-belly flew in, alighting a foot or so below the nest-hole. The Starlings scattered. As the male woodpecker hitched upward, his mate stuck her head out. The male flew to a branch a few feet away and called *creer*. The call sounded peaceful rather than combative. Not while I watched from 0710 to 0730 did any of the Starlings return.

When I visited the nest-tree at 1625 on 22 June, neither woodpecker was in sight. Even as I stood there watching, a Starling popped out of the nest-hole and flew off. I found on the ground the shell of one end of a white, not very glossy Red-bellied Woodpecker's egg. The piece was dry and without a trace of membrane. Nowhere could I find the other end.

During my brief watch on the morning of 23 June I did not hear or see either of the woodpeckers. On the evening of 24 June the male bird was in the nest-tree and this time he was quite noisy: he called *chiv* or *chiv-chiv* several times. Only once did he call *creer*. When the female appeared, she also called *chiv* several times. Starlings were much in evidence throughout leafy parts of the old maples, but the woodpeckers made no attempt to drive them off. Never, during the rest of the summer, did I see the female woodpecker again.

On the morning of 27 June I again saw a Starling pop out of the woodpeckers' nest-hole. I waited for some time under the nest-tree but saw neither a Starling nor a woodpecker go into the hole. On 30 June I heard the male woodpecker call *creer* once. On 3 and 4 July I saw the male woodpecker in the nest-tree. Late in the evening on 8 July I heard the *creer* call and a bit later saw the male bird on a stub not far from the nest-hole. Early in the morning on 9 July I heard the *creer* call two or three times and also a brief, not very loud drum. On 27, 28, and 29 July I heard the *creer* call several times but did not see the bird that was giving it.

So far as I know, the Starlings did not raise a brood in the woodpeckers' third nest-hole. But they surely took it, perhaps as a place in which to roost. I feel sure that the woodpeckers did not raise a brood anywhere.

818 WEST BROOKS ST., NORMAN, OKLAHOMA 73069, 1 SEPTEMBER 1980.

GENERAL NOTES

Red-throated Loon in Tulsa County, Oklahoma. — Late in the morning of 22 November 1981, I found a Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) among the many species of waterfowl present that day on Lynn Lane Reservoir in east Tulsa, Tulsa County, Oklahoma. When I first saw the bird, it was about ¼ mile away. The skies were clear and the sun was behind me. The loon was very elusive and would disappear from view for periods of up to one-half hour. It spent very little time on the surface, seeming to dive constantly. Twice I was able to approach to within 300 feet and examine it through my 20-power telescope. However, it took about two hours to acquire sufficiently detailed field notes to establish the loon's identity.

My identification of the Red-throated Loon was based on the following observations. It was distinctly smaller than the Common Loon (*G. immer*) nearby and slightly larger than a Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) or Gadwall (*A. strepera*). Compared to the Common Loon, its plumage was paler throughout, its back uniformly speckled with white spots rather than being solid or "scaly", and its bill was about half the size of that bird's, with a distinctly upturned lower mandible. The neck was held fully extended and angled somewhat forward. At one point, the bird flew the length of the reservoir before settling back on the water, affording a clear view of its wings, which were uniformly medium gray on their upper surfaces.

At 1345, I left the reservoir long enough to call Jim Arterburn and John Tomer, who arrived at 1430. We relocated the bird within 15 minutes, and they soon agreed with my identification. Late the next evening, I also showed the loon to Roberta and Wallace Whaling and to Elwin Aud.

There are eight previous reports of *Gavia stellata* in Oklahoma from Oklahoma, Osage, Payne, and Roger Mills counties (G. M. Sutton Summary of Bird Records, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma). None of these birds was collected or identifiably photographed; thus the species is still listed as hypothetical for the State (Sutton, G. M., 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 2). Seven of the eight previous Oklahoma records are for the period 14 November through 20 January. During the eight winters between the fall of 1973 and spring of 1981, 11 records were reported in American Birds for the Southern Great Plains Region; all spanned the period 2 November to 20 January.—James C. Hoffman, *4863 S. Braden, Apt. 4A, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74135, 8 August 1983.*

Pied-billed Grebe with young in Alfalfa County, Oklahoma. — On 6 May 1980, while my husband John and I were walking the Eagle Roost Nature Trail at Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma, our attention was roused by a sharp call coming from a large pond close by. Presently we saw an adult Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) accompanied at first by one chick, then by two. Each chick was strongly striped

and about a third as long as the parent.

All at once, both chicks disappeared. The parent (assumed to be the hen) now made hen-like clucking sounds as she peered about. After we watched for five minutes — still with no chicks in sight — we were puzzled. Presently the old bird shook herself and the chicks appeared, both of them close to her. After being visible for a short time, again they went under. For another five minutes we failed to see them anywhere. Once more the mother shook herself and there the chicks were, swimming single file right behind her. When the chicks went under the third time and we failed to see them during a ten-minute wait, we walked on, looking back from time to time, still puzzled. After reaching the far end of the pond, well away from the spot at which we had been standing, we saw the three grebes again — the adult with her chicks just behind her.

We guessed that the adult bird, sensing danger, signalled the chicks to go under, and that when they came up they crawled under her wings (see Palmer, R. S., 1962, Handbook of North American birds, Vol. 1, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, Connecticut, p. 112). There, quite out of sight, they could breathe. A. C. Bent (1919, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 107:42) reports seeing "recently hatched chicks" that dived and swam away or hid among the reeds "with only their little bills protruding above the surface." Possibly the chicks that we watched remained submerged except for their bills, but the fact that the parent's shaking was immediately followed by the appearance of the chicks suggests that they had been hidden in some part of her plumage. Bent (*loc. cit.*) also states: "Sometimes the parent bird carries [the chicks] on her back where they cling tenaciously while she dives and brings them up again, none the worse for their ducking." At no time did we see a chick on the old bird's back or a bulge in her plumage suggesting that a chick might be hiding there.

John A. Kirk, Acting Refuge Manager, told us that Pied-bills had not been observed nesting on the refuge for many years. According to G. M. Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 12), L. A. Greenwalt found "five young" there on 25 June 1958 (Baumgartner, F. M., 1958, Aud. Field Notes 12:423) and J. L. Cracraft saw "three young" there on 20 June 1963.—Emma H. Messerly, *344 S. E. Elmhurst, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74003, 9 June 1980.*

Ross' Geese in Cimarron and Tulsa counties, Oklahoma. — On 26 March 1983, I visited the Boise City sewage ponds in central Cimarron County at the westernmost end of the Oklahoma panhandle. Great numbers of waterfowl had been attracted to these lagoons, one of the few stable sources of water for many miles thereabouts. Two waterfowl immediately stood out from the throngs of ducks because of their whiteness and slightly larger size. Based on size alone, they appeared to be Ross' Geese (*Chen rossii*), rather than Snow Geese (*C. caerulescens*), the latter bigger and far more common. I approached close enough to see their bills clearly. Compared to a Snow's, these bills were smaller and "stubbier", lacked the black "grinning" line, and were pinkish in color except for their purplish-blue bases. Immature Ross' Geese appear to be as white as adults, but often exhibit duskiness on crown and neck; however, all the waterfowl on the ponds were extremely wary, so that I was able neither to

estimate the age of the geese nor to photograph them. When I left next day (March 27), the two birds still lingered at the sewerponds (Williams, F., 1983, Am. Birds 37:886).

James Hoffman and I discovered two more Ross' Geese on 2 April 1983 at Lynn Lane Reservoir in east Tulsa, Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma. These two were grazing in a wheat field with about 40 other geese, primarily Snows. The Ross' Geese were conspicuous because they were only two-thirds to three-quarters as large as the others, and because of their smaller, parti-colored bills. At least one of the Ross' showed a small amount of duskiness on its neck, indicating that it probably was an immature. Even so, the two Ross' still appeared whiter overall than the nearby sub-adult Snows. The smaller geese remained until 3 April (Williams, 1983, *loc. cit.*).

G. M. Sutton (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 6) mentioned seven records of Ross' Goose, all from Johnston and Alfalfa counties. An additional record, of two birds found in Oklahoma during January 1969, was published in Bellrose (1976, Ducks, geese and swans of North America, 2nd ed., Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, p. 132) but the exact location was not given. Additional records since 1974 from G. M. Sutton's Summary of Bird Records at the University of Oklahoma include an immature female (UOMZ 11131), the third specimen for Oklahoma, shot on 15 November 1975 in Johnston County (Newsom, P. W., 1976, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 9:32); two fully adult birds (male and female) shot in Custer County on 28 December 1976 (Klett, E. V., and C. C. Heflebower, 1977, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 10:30-31); two to five birds observed repeatedly in Custer County from 11 February to 25 March 1977 (Klett and Heflebower, *loc. cit.*); two individuals seen on 18 December 1978 at Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge, Johnston County, by C. Brown *et al.* (1979, Am. Birds 33:577); 10 Ross' Geese discovered on the Washita National Wildlife Refuge, Custer County, on 30 December 1978 by C. C. Heflebower *et al.* (1979, Am. Birds 33:577); maximum of 17 counted at same refuge on 29 December 1979 (1980, Am. Birds 34:575); one was seen there on 20 December 1980 (1981, Am. Birds 35:628), two more on 21 December 1981 (1982, Am. Birds 36:656). Records adjacent to Oklahoma include one near Clayton in Union County, New Mexico, immediately southwest of Cimarron County, Oklahoma (Krehbiel, A. J., 1980, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 13:28-29), and several between 1965 and 1978 from the Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge on the south shore of Lake Texoma in Grayson County, north-central Texas (Haller, K. W., 1978, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 11:29-30). The Boise City sighting is the first record for Cimarron County, as is the Tulsa observation for Tulsa County.

J. P. Prevett and R. R. Johnson (1977, Condor 79:121-123) proposed that the increased frequency of Ross' Goose sightings in the Central Flyway could be attributable to their association — even interbreeding — with Snow Geese (predominantly the white morph) on their breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic and in wintering areas along the Texas and Louisiana Gulf Coast. In recent years, the species has wintered on the Gulf Coast in ever-increasing

numbers (J. P. Prevett and C. D. MacInnes, 1972, Condor 74:431-438) and during fall is now recorded regularly in western Iowa and Missouri (Frederick, R. B., and R. R. Johnson, 1983, Condor 85:257-258; Peterjohn, B. G., 1983, Am. Birds 37:186). The recent upsurge in sightings eastward of the "normal" range must also be due in some measure to increased observer scrutiny of Snow Goose flocks everywhere (see Am. Birds 37:151, 159, 161, 186, 1983). Careful inspection of Snow Goose flocks in Oklahoma in the future will likely result in additional Ross' Goose sightings.—Paul Lehman, *P.O. Box 1061, Goleta, California 93116, June 8, 1983.*

Early spring record for Cattle Egret in Oklahoma.—In midafternoon on 15 February 1982 (day mild, overcast, and humid; weather much pleasanter than during past two or three weeks, when much snow fell), as my wife Diane and I were driving across the northwestern part of Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, we saw a flock of five white herons in a wet wheat field. Suspecting that any mid-February sighting of a white heron in Oklahoma would be noteworthy, I stopped briefly to observe the birds through my 9 x 36 binocular. All were yellow-billed, but they were far too small for Great Egrets *(Casmerodius albus),* so I decided they must be Cattle Egrets *(Bubulcus ibis).* To avoid blocking traffic, I drove the car to the next intersection, turned it around, and went back for a close look from a safer parking spot.

Using the binocular, I saw the birds well. Four of them were pure white, but one had a strong tinge of tan on the top and back of its head. They were in a loose flock, advancing in typical Cattle Egret fashion, one occasionally hopping ahead of the others as if it had sighted food. The flock moved to within about 50 yards of the car. Although the whole wheat field was wet from recent snowmelt, the one conspicuous pond of the area was a playa about an acre in extent several hundred yards north of the egrets. The flock moved not toward, but away from this playa. No cattle or other livestock were in the area.

Sutton (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 4) gives 11 March as the earliest date for the Cattle Egret's spring arrival from the south. Two winter records mentioned by him are for 20 January 1972 (Oklahoma County) and for 1 February 1974 (Payne County). — John S. Shackford, *Route 1, Box 125, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73111, 20 February 1982.*

A pair of Say's Phoebes with nine young. — At 1000 on 19 June 1983 we found a Say's Phoebe (*Sayornis saya*) nest atop a large wooden stringer under a highway bridge 5 miles north of Kenton, in northwestern Cimarron County, Oklahoma. The mud and grass nest, about six feet off the ground, contained four fully feathered young birds, so large that they were huddled as much on the nest as in it. Except for a few active Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) nests, it was the only nest under the bridge. Both adult birds were hawking for insects in the surrounding pastureland to feed the five recently fledged phoebes that were actively flying about within 100 feet (30 m) of the bridge. These young apparently represented an earlier brood, for several times we watched an adult feed one of them after it had returned to the bridge. No

other adult phoebes did we see in the vicinity, even though we spent an hour and a half there. But we could not be certain, of course, that both adult birds (or either) were the original parents of both broods.

Say's Phoebe ordinarily lays four or five eggs, incubates them for about twelve days, and fledges the young after approximately two weeks; the species is generally two-brooded, the male usually assuming care of the first while the female is busy with the second (Bent, A. C., 1942, Life histories of North American birds, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 179, pp. 168-169).

This apparently represents a case of double-broodedness in *Sayornis saya*. G. M. Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, pp. 339-340) described this species as a transient and summer resident in western Oklahoma that breeds in the Black Mesa country of Cimarron County in small numbers. However, he did not mention any nesting records involving more than a single brood.

To our knowledge, this is also the only record of a Say's Phoebe nest beneath a bridge in Oklahoma. Sutton (*op. cit.*) stated: "No occupied nest thus far found in Oklahoma has been seen under bridge, though site of this sort is often used in southwestern Kansas (D. F. Parmelee, H. A. Stephens)."—Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biological Sciences, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505* and Laurence E. Dunn, *Gate, Oklahoma 73844, 21 June, 1983.*

Early nesting of Blue Jay in Oklahoma.—Between 1030 and 1100 on 18 March 1975, a moist, somewhat raw, but not very cold day, I observed two separate Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*) gathering nest material on the campus of the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma. Both birds were picking up and carrying wet leaves. One bird found its leaves at the edge of a shallow rainwater pool between the Memorial Union and the Bizzell Library, the other in a flowerbed about 20 yards away. The first bird carried the leaves northwestward to a point well north of the Administration Building, a distance of about 100 yards, where I lost sight of it. The second flew to a small evergreen holly tree close to the library's north wall. Here, after alighting about 6 feet up, it hopped upward to a half-finished nest in a thickly leaved part of the tree's top about 10 feet from the ground. Conceivably the two birds were a pair, for both birds of some Blue Jay pairs join forces in nest-building (Sutton, G. M., 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 370), but the fact that the two did not pick up leaves at the same place or fly off together strongly suggested that two nests were being built. The date is not exceptionally early: according to Sutton *(lo. cit.)* J. Muskrat observed Blue Jays nest-building [in Norman] on 19 March 1961.—George M. Sutton, *818 W. Brooks St., Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 21 March 1975.*

THE BULLETIN, the official organ of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society, is published quarterly in March, June, September, and December, at Norman, Oklahoma. Subscription is by membership in the OOS: $2 student, $5 single, $7 family, $10 sustaining, per year. Life membership $75. Treasurer, Bill Dirck, Rt. 5, Box 401, Ada, Oklahoma 74820. Editor, Jack D. Tyler, Department of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505.