

A TEMPORARY COLONY OF LESSER GOLDFINCHES
IN CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN G. NEWELL

Two color morphs of the male Lesser Goldfinch, *Carduelis psaltria*, are known: a largely black-backed bird that seasonally occupies the area from Colorado southward through portions of New Mexico, the Oklahoma Panhandle and west Texas into Mexico, and a green-backed form occurring westward to the Pacific Coast, thence south through California, Arizona, and parts of New Mexico and adjacent Mexico. The males which I have seen on the east slope of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle and in the Edwards Plateau of Texas have, with few exceptions, been black-backed.



MALE LESSER GOLDFINCH

Black-backed male photographed by John S. Shackford near Meridian State Park, Central Texas, on 4 April, 1976. This location is 260 miles south of Red Rock Canyon State Park, Oklahoma.

Except for Cimarron County, records in Oklahoma have come principally from the southwestern section where the species is a rare or uncommon migrant and summer resident (Tyler, J. D., *Birds of Southwestern Oklahoma*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 50), but no nesting records are known there. Even in Cimarron County, a popular area for ornithological field studies, few nests have been discovered.

On 20 May 1967, I and several participants of a field trip to Methodist Canyon Camp in southwestern Canadian and adjacent Caddo counties, were surprised to find a small flock of Lesser Goldfinches feeding in grass near the dining hall. In an effort to learn more about them, I began to make periodic visits to this and adjacent canyon areas, visits that were to continue for the next 13 years. My field notes through 1980 encompass more than 130 trips and hundreds of hours spent investigating Red Rock Canyon State Park near Hinton and nearby Methodist Canyon, the only places I was ever able to locate the goldfinches. These records, filed with the Stovall Museum at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, confirm that for a number of years, Lesser Goldfinches were residents of these protected canyons from the middle of May into early October, with exceptional dates of 10 May and 19 October.

Counts of the Lesser Goldfinches are only estimates. Because the little birds were extremely active and the foliage rather dense, I could enumerate them only when they ventured into open areas about campgrounds, buildings or playgrounds. During the summer, the canyons were crowded and noisy with campers. For this reason, early morning observations were the most fruitful. The largest number of birds I counted in Methodist Canyon was five. I saw both males and females during May and June, but few if any females in July and early August.

On 25 May 1969, two years after discovering Lesser Goldfinches in Methodist Canyon, I found them in Red Rock Canyon State Park, a few miles to the west. That day I saw four or more, including two black-backed males.

When I next visited the park on 16 September 1969, I was amazed by the presence of no fewer than 50 goldfinches scattered throughout open places in the park! Eight or ten black-backed males were still actively singing and chasing, even at this fairly late date. I could not be certain that some birds in female-like plumage were not young males. The adult males alternately sang, chased other males from their territories, circled in great arcs or performed exquisite "butterfly" flight displays near females. A high, dead branch was usually chosen from which to display, and they frequently stretched to full height while calling exuberantly "tee-dee" (last note higher) or "tee-yur" (last syllable slurred downward). Sometimes they broke into full, continuous song and it was not unusual for them to be the only species singing during the intense heat of midday.

The goldfinches sometimes mimicked the songs of other species. On one occasion, I watched a "poorly colored" male as it sang quietly in the shade. Although he sounded far away, he was actually only 12 or 15 feet distant. In an elfin voice, he included in his rendition a Tufted Titmouse (*Parus bicolor*), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila caerulea*), Rufous-crowned Sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps*), and Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), clearly and distinctly.

I heard another male imitate a Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) and Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) to perfection.

Next day (17 September), Nelson Hall and I found the goldfinches equally abundant. Ten days later, I led a group of Oklahoma City Audubon Society members to the park where we found 30 or so goldfinches, including several bright males. During my last visit that season, I drove Margaret and Henry Walter to the park on 19 October and observed from 15 to 20 birds, including five black-backed males in bright feather and one with a greenish back. The large number of birds encountered on these last trips might have represented migrating goldfinches, or possibly a gathering of birds from drier areas outside the park to more attractive feeding and drinking spots within it. However, I suspect that many of these were young birds that had been reared locally. There were just too many in the number clad in female-like plumage for me to believe otherwise.

In 1970, I returned to Red Rock Canyon State Park repeatedly, hoping to locate a nest. On 22 May, Brad Carlton advised me that he had seen Lesser Goldfinches there. On the following day, I found at least four males in the park, some apparently moulting about the head. They were singing, chasing, and sometimes displaying in deliberate "butterfly flight" with wings and tail wide-spread. Strangely, I could find only two females.

When I returned on 7 June, I watched at least five males which seemed to have established definite territories, but no female could I locate. During subsequent visits on 14, 20, and 26 June and on 5 July, the situation had not changed.

On 12 July, I again found four or five adult males and saw one fly to a small, scraggly red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) standing alone between a playground swing-set and the road through the canyon. I checked the tree and found a nest about 16 feet above ground. It could hardly have been situated in a noisier place, with human activity all about, but there was a female or large chick in the nest. On the evening of 14 July, between 1930 and 2100, I was observing the nest closely when I saw the male fly in. The nest contained two large, well-feathered young birds; I hoped that they were not Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*). On the morning of 18 July, a number of friends accompanied me to the nest, including Nelson Hall, Ora and Al Reed, Brooks and Thula Parkhill, Vic Vacin, Walter Doane, Warren Harden, and George M. Sutton. Brooks Parkhill attempted to take photos of the nest, but it was too well hidden in the cedar branches. The parents flew in to feed the two active young even as Parkhill stood on a ladder not three feet from the nest! The chicks were ready to fledge, and one did so, flying across the road into some trees about 50 feet away.

Sutton found a female bird building a second nest approximately 100 yards from the first and about 32 feet up on one of the uppermost branches of a large cedar tree. This bird appeared to be constructing the nest with fibers of cedar bark. Once, she tried unsuccessfully to pull off pieces of a kite string draped over a limb. While we watched, a male flew in and copulated with her twice.

On 26 July, the first nest was empty and a female appeared to be incubating eggs in the second. We saw black-backed males repeatedly and one green-backed

male that sang as often as did the others. Two large fledglings noisily pursued a male for food; when they finally caught him, he hung upside down from a branch as the young fought to take the tidbit from his bill.

A visit to Red Rock Canyon on 2 August revealed that the female at nest two was still incubating. At least three males were yet actively singing. Near this nest we saw three youngsters chasing a male and begging food. On 9 August, the female on nest two seemed to be brooding; she frequently arose and looked under her body, and as the sun climbed higher, she stood over the nest with partially raised wings. Two days later, she was still on the nest and moved around a good deal, but I saw no young birds.

On 19 September, Sutton collected both nests for the Stovall Museum at the University of Oklahoma. Nest one was broken during the process, but nest two he recovered intact, noting that the inside was dirty, as if used by young birds. Its outside diameter measured $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches, the bowl $1\frac{1}{4} \times 2$ inches, and the depth about 1 inch. Distances to the nearest known nesting areas are 280 miles to Cimarron County, Oklahoma (Sutton, G. M., 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 596), and about 200 miles to Palo Duro Canyon in the Texas Panhandle (Stevenson, J. O., 1942, Condor 44:115).

Three adult males and ten or more female-like birds I found in the brush along the west canyon wall on 27 September. They appeared to be eating something from a freshly exposed sandstone rock surface.

Between 1971 and 1980 I continued to monitor the Lesser Goldfinches in both canyons. Although I located no more nests, I observed as many as five bright males in the park through 1973. The males were very aggressive after establishing territories. There were at least five territories in the playground area on 11 July 1971, and I observed several territorial skirmishes. On 25 July, a female flew across to the small stream to drink and bathe. As she crossed the open area, three males, apparently from adjoining territories, darted down to follow, met in the air a few feet from the ground and tumbled earthward in the most vicious three-way fight I've ever seen. They resembled a group of black and white butterflies. From 1974 through 1979 it was unusual to see even two or three males. Only rarely did I observe a female-plumaged bird. I did see two males on 3 August 1980, but none has been found since.

8304 LAKEAIRE DRIVE, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73132, 26 JULY, 1984.

AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS KILLED BY HAILSTORM IN DEWEY COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY ALAN STACEY

Dewey County lies near the heart of west central Oklahoma. Two major rivers, the North and South Canadian, meander from west to east through the county. A portion of Canton Lake, a major impoundment of the North Canadian, lies in the northeastern corner. During migration, considerable numbers of waterfowl, as well as many shorebirds and other aquatic species, spend time at Canton Lake and the numerous farm ponds and croplands in the area. The American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) is a regular transient

through western Oklahoma, and huge flocks may occasionally be seen. The pelicans use Canton Lake as a regular stopover where they feed and rest.

At approximately 1500 on 20 April 1984, a severe thunderstorm struck Dewey County, killing and injuring several members of a large flock of pelicans that had been loitering along the South Canadian River a few miles southwest of the lake. This area received the brunt of the storm, which produced excessively high winds, torrential rain, and hailstones up to three inches in diameter.

During the two weeks prior to the storm, a flock of between 200 and 250 pelicans had been repeatedly sighted resting and foraging in the South Canadian River just north of a bridge 5½ miles south and 8½ miles east of Taloga. They were probably attracted to that spot by the hordes of minnows thought by game ranger James Edwards (pers. comm.) to be spawning there. I consulted several local landowners. None could recall seeing pelicans in the vicinity before.

Minutes before the hailstorm hit, Joe Anson, an area resident, was driving along a road about a mile northeast of the river bridge when he noticed a large group of pelicans very high up. Alternately soaring and flapping, they were riding a thermal slowly upward. Because he was travelling away from the scene, Anson failed to observe the fatal incident which happened soon thereafter.

Following the storm, dead and crippled pelicans were discovered in its wake, a swath approximately 3 miles wide and 10 miles in length. Most of the birds were recovered not far from the area described above. Some pelicans had been impaled on tree limbs, others were tangled in barbed wire fences, lodged on utility poles, or otherwise incapacitated. Many birds were still alive, but seriously injured. A few appeared to be healthy except that they were unable to fly. These had probably been weakened and battered by the strong winds and large hail. Also noticed in the vicinity were a small number of Franklin's Gulls (*Larus pipixcan*) that had been killed. Surprisingly, no other kinds of birds were found dead.

Next day, employees of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and of the Washita National Wildlife Refuge (which is located about 50 miles southwest of Canton Lake, and which surrounds Foss Lake) began collection and cleanup operations. Live pelicans (49) were caught and released on Foss and Canton Lakes, and dead ones (51) were discarded. For about two weeks afterward, reports of local residents resulted in the procurement of at least 11 more crippled pelicans and 19 dead ones.

Heflebower and Klett (1980, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 13:25-28) reported that among a total of 3426 water birds killed on 17 October 1979 by a hailstorm at the Washita Refuge in Custer County, Oklahoma, only four were American White Pelicans. Most fatalities of that storm were waterfowl (e.g., 1143 Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) and 861 American Wigeons (*Anas americana*)), although 600 were Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*). Hail from another storm in Greer County, southwestern Oklahoma, on 5 October 1951 (see Jones, G. E., 1952, Wilson Bull. 64:166-167) inflicted widespread damage to wildlife. Although no water birds were found dead following that storm, 43 raptors, 41 Northern Bobwhites (*Colinus virginianus*) and 30 American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) were.

GENERAL NOTES

Albinistic Turkey Vulture in Alfalfa County, Oklahoma.—During the spring of 1982 Paul W. Grover procured a large number of salvaged bird specimens from a freezer at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, northwestern Oklahoma, for the Oklahoma State University Museum in Stillwater. One of these was a white Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*). Although it had been frozen since 18 September 1979, it was still in remarkably good condition. Fortunately, Assistant Refuge Manager John Kirk had attached a label to the bird containing a great deal of information. The vulture had been brought to the refuge by Dale Long, an Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation Game Ranger. Long had obtained the bird from a couple who lived 4 miles west of Aline, a town about 20 miles southwest of the refuge. They had found it, weak and incapable of flight, on the preceding day. Having no idea as to what kind of bird it was, they attempted to force-feed it poultry pellets. To treat its heavy infestation of feather lice, they had dusted the plumage with a pesticide. The next morning, it was dead.

I obtained the specimen from Grover in the spring of 1983 and photographed it. A photo is on file in my personal collection and at the Cameron University Museum of Zoology in Lawton, Oklahoma. The vulture was fully albinistic, for there were no dark pigments whatsoever in the plumage, the eyes were noticeably pink, the bill was ivory in color, the legs whitish, and skin of the head was pinkish gray. During the summer of 1983, William R. Eddleman made the bird into a study skin for the OSU Department of Zoology Museum (OKSU 2510). Shotgun pellets were found embedded in the bird's body.

Albinism in the family Cathartidae is apparently very rare. A. O. Gross (1965, The incidence of albinism in North American birds, *Bird-Banding* 36:67-71) examined records of 1847 individuals of 304 species among which were only 12 albino vultures. W. G. Voelker reported seeing a partially white Turkey Vulture in Harmon County, southwestern Oklahoma, during the fall of 1976 (*Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc.* 9:32-33, 1976), and P. N. Allaire (1977, Aberrant pigmentation in Kentucky birds, *Kentucky Birds* 53(1):13-16) described another from Kentucky.—James W. Lish, *Department of Zoology, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078. 17 January, 1985.*

Common Poorwill in Tulsa County, Oklahoma.—George M. Sutton (1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 272) lists the Common Poorwill (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*) as a "summer resident in western Oklahoma" but states that it has been recorded eastward to Washington, Oklahoma, Cleveland and Murray counties. William A. Carter (1968, *Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc.* 1:19), reporting on the 7 July 1967 occurrence of an adult female Common Poorwill 7 miles south of Ada in Pontotoc County, reviewed records for the species in Oklahoma, pointing out that although sight records may extend farther east in Oklahoma, the easternmost breeding record is from the vicinity of Cogar in Caddo County. Carter cited an old record by White (Oologist 1931, 48:158-159; incorrectly reported by Carter as 1935) of Common Poorwill eggs in Tulsa County and stated that they were probably Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) eggs. In his publications, G. M. Sutton (1967, 1974) omitted this

Tulsa County egg record and R. M. Barnes, editor and publisher of the *Oologist* at the time, stated doubt about it.

On 21 March 1974, a recently killed Common Poorwill was brought to the author by Dr. Paul Buck of the University of Tulsa Faculty of Natural Sciences. It had been found dead that day in a southeastern Tulsa residential area. The skin was prepared by John S. Tomer and is deposited in the University of Tulsa collections (No. 157). The bird is an adult female that had very little body fat. Its throat patch is pure white with no buffy feathers. The date is five days earlier than any previous record for Oklahoma (Sutton Summary of Bird Records, Stovall Museum, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman) and is the easternmost specimen for the state.—Hague L. Lindsay, *Faculty of Natural Sciences, University of Tulsa, 600 South College Avenue, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74104, 28 July 1984.*

Unusual death of Cedar Waxwing.—On 5 April 1980, an adult Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) was found dead beneath a mimosa tree in a residential part of Chickasha in Grady County, Oklahoma. Upon examination, a 25mm-long twig about .09mm in diameter was discovered protruding from its breast, and on the surrounding feathers could be seen a trace of dried blood. An autopsy revealed that the branch had passed completely through the pectoral muscles, fracturing the keel of the sternum as it penetrated that bone to enter the thoracic cavity.

How the bird managed to impale itself is conjectural. A Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) might have rammed the waxwing onto the tip of the twig after dispatching it, but this seems unlikely because shrikes ordinarily impale avian prey “between the gullet and windpipe just above the breast” (H. L. Stoddard in Bent, A. C., 1950, Life histories of North American wagtails, shrikes, vireos, and their allies. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 197). Also, the force of impact required to do so much damage would seem possible only if the bird had collided with the tiny branch while flying at full speed as if, for example, it were being pursued through woody cover by a raptor.

The specimen was preserved and catalogued into the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma Collection (USAO 63) in Chickasha. The species of the twig was not determined.—Charles M. Mather, *Box 82517, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, Chickasha, Oklahoma 73018, 24 January 1985.*

European Starlings lining nest or roosting quarters in fall.—From about 0900 to 0910 on 23 October 1979 (bright day; air sharp, but well above freezing), I watched two European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) taking what appeared to be nesting material through the slats of a second-floor louver at the south end of the Stovall Museum's main building on the campus of the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma. One bird took in two rather large body feathers of a Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*), the other what appeared to be a flake of bark or part of a pine cone. The two crane feathers were together in the starling's bill when I first saw them, but they separated and the starling made two trips carrying them in.

The whole fall had been notably mild, but hardly springlike enough to prompt initiation of a reproductive cycle despite decreasing day-length. The thought occurs to me that the birds were adding material to roosting quarters

that would be used more or less communally during the coming winter. I have been watching starlings at that louvered window year after year since the fall of 1952. Many broods have been reared there in spring and summer. Often on cold but bright winter mornings several starlings are to be seen there standing in a row on the window ledge, making soft, somewhat conversational sounds.

The crane feathers were from one of several specimens killed by a freak hailstorm in Custer County, southwestern Oklahoma, in mid-October. The specimens were being skeletonized by D. Scott Wood.—George M. Sutton (deceased), *Stovall Museum of Science and History, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73019, 26 October 1979.*

First Kentucky Warbler record for Comanche County, Oklahoma.—

On 10 September 1984 I banded and photographed an adult male Kentucky Warbler (*Oporornis formosus*) that I netted in my back yard along the East Branch of Wolf Creek in Lawton, Oklahoma. A photograph is on file in the Cameron University Museum of Zoology (CUMZ 960). This bird is a migrant and summer resident in central and eastern Oklahoma, but is uncommon in western sectors (Sutton, G.M., 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 516). Not only is this the first record for Comanche County, but it is also the second sighting in the fall west of the 98th Meridian in Oklahoma. Other reports west of this longitude include a singing male that Lewis W. Oring saw 2.5 miles southeast of Davidson, Tillman County, on 8 May 1965 (Tyler, J. D., 1979, *Birds of Southwestern Oklahoma*, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 44); one that Rena Ross observed near Durham, in Roger Mills County, on 23 September 1967 (G. M. Sutton Summary of Bird Records, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman); and the species was found repeatedly in Alfalfa County between 30 April 1978 and 24 June 1979 (Sutton Summary). The closest nesting locality is in Caddo County about 30 air miles to the northeast: during the spring of 1867, Edwin Palmer collected a specimen (USNM 53017) and a nest containing three eggs (USNM 13542) near the Kiowa Agency that was located 17 miles southeast of Fort Cobb (Tyler, *loc. cit.*). There are two specimens from Cimarron County in far western Oklahoma, both males. UOMZ 5438 was collected by J. L. Cracraft along the Cimarron River 13 miles north of Boise City on 25 April 1964, and UOMZ 6279 by John S. Weske 9 miles east of Kenton on 11 May 1968. The former specimen was erroneously reported as a female by G. M. Sutton (1967, *loc. cit.*).—Louis E. McGee, 1703 NW 43rd, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 20 November 1984.

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