



YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD HABITAT AND YOUNG

Both photos taken by Jack D. Tyler on 14 June 1986 at Optima Lake, Texas County, Oklahoma.

A NESTING YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD COLONY
IN TEXAS COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN S. SHACKFORD AND JACK D. TYLER

Between 1900 and 1930 on 29 May 1986, Shackford was taking inventory of the birdlife of Optima Lake in Texas County, near the center of the Oklahoma Panhandle, when he noticed eight or ten adult Yellow-headed Blackbirds (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) of both sexes at an extensive marsh of cattails (*Typha angustifolia*) bordering the northwest shore of the lake (Fig. 1). The males were singing vigorously, particularly from scattered dead salt cedar (*Tamarix gallica*) trees projecting above the tall cattails. They appeared to be protecting individual territories. The date was late for migration, even though this western species has been recorded in the Panhandle at Webb's Lake 7 miles east of Hardesty, Texas County, as late as 29 May when W. A. Carter, Larry A. Pullium, Danny L. Jobe and Gerald P. Hutchinson saw many of them in 1969 (Carter field notes). Large flocks containing both sexes are sometimes encountered. For instance, the junior author and Anne Powell counted over 420 at the Boise City sewage ponds on 13 May 1973 (Tyler field notes).

Suspecting that this was a nesting colony, Shackford waded out into the marsh to investigate. When he squeaked near the males, they were noticeably irritated, scolding raucously as they hovered overhead. The few Red-winged

Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) within earshot, however, were unperturbed. Before long he discovered, interwoven among several cattail stalks about 3½ feet above the water, a nest that held three grayish-olive eggs, spotted and blotched with light brown. It was composed largely of dead blades of cattail or bulrush (*Scirpus* sp.) and a few black feathers were in the lining. The second nest, found shortly thereafter, contained four eggs and was about 3 feet high. The water here was only about a foot deep.

Shackford contacted Tyler that evening, who joined him at the lake on 13 June. The next morning, between 0745 and 0830, they surveyed the entire marsh through a spotting scope from the dam, which lay to the southeast. In that section of cattails where Shackford had found nests, three or four male Yellow-heads were spotted, another was about 300 yards south of this main colony, and yet another near the dam. One male even chased a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) briefly as it flew over his territory. We watched one of the females fly from the colony all the way across the lake to the dam — a distance of approximately ¾ mile — where she foraged in the grass. After catching food, she made her way back across the open expanse of water. This procedure was repeated four times, and twice a large insect was seen in her bill while she was airborne. Fautin (1940) commented that most of the Yellow-head's food is obtained outside the nesting area.

At 0945, the authors walked around the northeast tip of the lake to the cattail marsh. The temperature had risen by this time to about 90°F on a clear, bright day of virtual calm. Except where a few room-sized openings were interspersed, the cattails grew so closely together as to be nearly impenetrable. The Yellow-heads began to utter loud alarm notes as the observers neared their territories. Although the two nests found by Shackford in May were not relocated, another was soon discovered. It was neatly interwoven to about 25 cattail leaf-stalks 37 inches above the water and about 10 feet in from the closest opening. The cattails, typical of others in the marsh, rose 70 inches above the water, which was 15 inches deep. In the nest were two hatchlings and two eggs.

Fautin (1941b) reported that clutch size in Utah ranged from two to five, with four the commonest number. The nest itself measured 3½ to 4 inches outside height, the bowl 3 inches in both depth and diameter. Our squeaking attracted about 15 birds, with neither sex preponderant.

The second nest held two nestlings almost ready to leave; a larger fledgling was clinging to the cattails two feet above them. This nest was 22 inches from the water in dense cattails about 20 feet from the nearest clearing. When the young birds gaped for food, their orange-red mouth linings were conspicuous. Richter (1984) reported that this species shows a high level of hatching asynchrony, so that few nests ever contain more than two hatchlings in one day. This promotes brood reduction of younger nestlings under conditions of food stress. Young Yellow-heads on average leave the nest at 11 days of age (Fautin 1941a), so the authors estimated this older chick to have been about 10 to 12 days old. It was collected and later prepared as a voucher specimen by Tyler (male, CUMZ 981). It measured as follows: total length 131, wing 79, tail 18, tarsus 41 mm, and weight 50 g. The exact collection site was 3 miles east and 4½ north of Hardesty, Oklahoma.

Three downy young, estimated to be from three to five days old, were resting quietly in the third nest, which hung 26 inches over the water, bound to cattails

eight feet in from one of the large openings. This nest, like the others, was constructed of dead grasses with a few cattail leaves intermingled.

A short while later, another stub-tailed, recently fledged male chick (Fig. 2), was found clinging to cattails some distance from any known nest, but its nest could not be located. It was similar in size to the young male taken from the second nest. This fledgling, as well as all eggs and young of the three nests described above, were photographed and the slides deposited at Cameron University. In addition, two other short-tailed, brownish-gray fledglings were seen flying about in the colony. Because one or two adult male Yellow-headed Blackbirds and six or eight females were observed carrying food, it was felt that there were other nests nearby. However, it would have been virtually impossible to completely search the big marsh. In fact, without the solicitous behavior of the parent birds, the authors would probably not have discovered a single nest.

Fautin (1940) also found that nests in Utah were inevitably suspended above water in a territory occupied by a male and one to five females. Accordingly, the authors' estimate of a total of 25 adult Yellow-heads at the lake was felt to be conservative, for a few other males and females were noticed in contiguous marshes.

Backdating from 14 June, and assuming the average age at fledging to be 11 days, the newly fledged young Yellow-heads in this colony would have hatched on or about 3 June from eggs that had been incubated an average of 12 days (Fautin 1941a) after having been laid about 22 May. Since fledglings do not learn to fly until attaining an age of approximately 21 days (Fautin 1941b), the flying young seen in the colony would have been at least 10 days older. The eggs from which they hatched, therefore, would have been laid on or about 12 May. Allowing a few days for pairing and nest construction, breeding at Optima lake probably began in 1986 around the first week of May.

Optima Lake was impounded in 1978, and has never been deeper than 83 feet from the top of the floodgates; at the time of these observations, it held only about 400 (7%) of the potential 5340 surface-acres of water at the top of the conservation pool (*vide*, Ben Burdo, lake ranger, and Corps of Engineers data). It is possible that the Yellow-heads had bred at Optima Lake previously. Certainly the habitat had been available for several years.

Xanthocephalus is not an uncommon nester in nearby Colorado (Bailey and Niedrach 1965), the northern half of New Mexico (Hubbard 1978) and in western Kansas (Johnston 1964). For Texas, there is one old nesting record: between 18 and 30 May 1876, C. A. H. McCauley found a nest in Armstrong County in the Panhandle (Oberholser 1974). There are also a few recent breeding records, all in the Panhandle: for Castro County in 1978 (1978, *Amer. Birds* 32:1181) and 1982 (1982, *Amer. Birds* 36:994); nesting was also reported in Castro, Parmer and Swisher counties by Fischer, *et al.* (1982), and in Bailey County in 1986 (1986, *Amer. Birds* 40:1224).

These findings constitute the first breeding record in Oklahoma since 1914 for Yellow-headed Blackbirds. The only other known record was in Cimarron County, near Kenton: R. Crompton Tate (1923) collected a nest with three eggs at a slough on the C. F. Rowan ranch on 19 June 1914. The "young in juvenal plumage" seen in a small flock with females on 25 May 1905, near Minco in Grady County, central Oklahoma (Wetmore 1918), might have been migrating subadult males not fledged in Oklahoma in the opinion of G. M. Sutton (1967),

since the spring passage of fully adult males is over by mid-May. There are mid-summer records for several other (mostly western) counties, but the majority probably represent southbound migrants (Sutton 1967). Sizable cattail marshes in the Panhandle and other areas of western Oklahoma should be watched closely for nesting activity in the future.

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GENERAL NOTES

Trumpeter Swans in Greer County, southwestern Oklahoma.—On 8 February 1986 at approximately 0915, I discovered six swans loitering around a pond 9 miles southwest of Mangum, Oklahoma. Five were immaculate white adults, the sixth a dusky young bird. They were much larger than Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) and I could see that the adults' bills were completely black, lacking the yellow patch at the base typical of most Whistling Swans (*Olor cygnus*). I was too far away to tell whether there was a pink "grin line" on the bill of any of the adults, but could see that the young swan's bill was black basally, pinkish toward the center, and black at the tip. I suspected that they were Trumpeter Swans (*Olor buccinator*).

On 24 February I notified Quartz Mountain State Park naturalist Victoria Begin of the swans. She tentatively agreed with my identification after viewing them on 2 March. On 6 March Dr. Jack D. Tyler confirmed our identification

using a high-magnification Celestron spotting scope. It revealed the "grin line," which is diagnostic for the Trumpeter Swan.

The pond is shallow and covers 10 or 12 acres, with little or no cover along shore. Surrounding terrain is covered by mixedgrass pastureland in above average condition and scattered mesquites (*Prosopis juliflora*). Numerous gypsum outcroppings nearby have resulted from erosion of the local Permian Redbed soils.

I was able to observe the birds a number of times during various parts of the day and they seemed unconcerned by my presence after the first few visits. Their peak feeding period was usually from 0800-0930, and they appeared to eat primarily Chara (*Chara* sp.), sago pondweed (*Potamogeton pectinatus*) and American pondweed (*Potamogeton americanus*). The many ducks that also frequented the pond probably utilized these same food plants as well. Some grazing of "winter grass" (little barley, *Hordeum pusillum*) and curlymesquite (*Hilaria belangeri*) occurred during the late afternoon (1700-1800).

During feeding periods the swans were very active, flapping their wings and chasing each other. After foraging, from approximately 1000 until mid-afternoon, they spent time preening, then rested in the shallow water near shore. When at rest, they frequently placed their heads back over one wing, and appeared to be sleeping. At other times, the swans splashed water over their backs with their huge wings, an activity in which they seemed to delight. If the weather was especially hot, they usually spent the day resting in deeper water away from the shoreline.

The swans showed alarm on a number of occasions. Tumbleweeds (*Salsola kali*), that occasionally blew across the pond provoked them to emit a two-note alarm call ("ko-ho") that could be heard for some distance. I first heard it when a coyote approached the pond. The birds began calling and left the shore, remaining in deeper water until the coyote had departed. This alarm call was also given when the swans were disturbed by low-flying airplanes spraying nearby wheat fields. Large birds flying overhead caused them consternation so that they became alert and restless, but they did not call. Cattle that grazed and drank nearby did not alarm the swans.

The largest swan behaved as though it were the dominant bird of this small flock and was vigilant at all times. It stayed awake during periods of rest, and would frequently chase stragglers back into the group with neck outstretched, wings extended. Always, it remained on the outside edge of the little band, cautious and protective.

During the several days prior to 10 March, the swans began to grow restless, taking short flights away from the pond and frequently beating their wings, as if preparing to take off. At 1530 on 11 March, they were gone. Since they had been present at 1730 on 10 March, they must have departed some time in the intervening 22 hours. A cold front that moved into the area at approximately 0630 on 11 March might have been the ultimate migratory stimulus.

None of these swans was banded or tagged. We initially thought that they might have come from the Trumpeter Swan restoration project in the Hennepin Park District of Minnesota, but those birds had all been marked in some way. The Oklahoma swans may well have come from the Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota, the closest known wild flock to Oklahoma. — Wesley

Webb, *Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, 220 W. Franklin St., Mangum, Oklahoma 73554, 17 March 1986.*

Turkey Vultures in southwestern Oklahoma in winter.—During the National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count conducted in Stephens County, southwestern Oklahoma, on 28 December 1986, seven Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) were observed by several participants. The 15-mile diameter count circle lies in the northeastern section of the county and encompasses four large impoundments and extensive tracts of pasture and farm land accented with numerous small mesas and sandstone escarpments. The original scruboak forest has been fragmented considerably, but much of the bottomland hardwood timber is intact.

Six vultures were sighted in the western half of the count area by Clyde Ferguson, Roma Lenehan, and John Davis, among others. Anita Young and Frances Neeld, who were working the southeastern quadrant, saw another. All of these birds were soaring. The weather was unseasonably mild, ranging from a low of 35°F early to 65°F in the late afternoon.

The Turkey Vulture normally is a summer resident in Oklahoma, arriving from the south in early March and departing around the end of November; however, there are many winter records, particularly for eastern Oklahoma (Sutton, G. M., 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 90). Its appearance in the colder months may well depend not only on the availability of food, but also to some degree on the presence of thermal updrafts for soaring (Sutton, 1967, *loc. cit.*).

In southwestern Oklahoma, the latest fall date for the species is 21 November and the earliest spring record is 20 February, although it has been seen in winter on 2 and 5 February, 31 January (Tyler, J. D., 1979, *Birds of southwestern Oklahoma*, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 16), and 12 January (Tyler, Jack D., and Jeff D. Tyler, 1987, *Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc.* 20:6-7). These winter sightings occurred for the most part during periods of unseasonably warm weather and could represent sporadic, abortive attempts by the big birds to move northward prematurely, for they winter not far south of Oklahoma (Texas Orn. Soc., 1984, *Checklist of the birds of Texas*, 2nd ed., p. 29). These late December birds in Stephens County were probably stragglers that had not yet been forced southward by the rigors of winter, for there is not a single documented instance of the species overwintering in this part of the state (see Tyler and Tyler, 1987, *op. cit.* for a 50-year summary of arrival dates in southwestern Oklahoma).—Frances Neeld, *1219 Elder, Duncan, Oklahoma 73533, 20 March 1987.*

Early spring sighting of American Woodcock for Oklahoma.—At approximately 1030 on 15 March 1985, Nolan Young and I were searching for quail with his dogs ¼ mile southwest of Pottawatomie Twins Pond on the Quanah Range of the Fort Sill Military Reservation in Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. This area of open grassland could be called a mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*) savannah. We had just walked into a shallow drainage that had been burned a few days earlier when, surprisingly, an adult American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) noisily took flight. The ground here was quite muddy from rain that had fallen earlier, and though recently burned, still retained numerous tussocks of dried grass. It was from one of these that the bird flushed.

The woodcock is considered an uncommon migrant and winter resident in Comanche County (five records), although George W. Johnson, former Fort Still biologist, reported them as "numerous" at Fort Sill in the late 1960's (Tyler, J. D., 1979, *Birds of southwestern Oklahoma*, Stovall Museum. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, p. 22). It is a transient and summer visitant in eastern and central Oklahoma from 3 April to 7 December and winter records span the period from 24 December to 7 February (Sutton, G. M., 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 181).

One possible explanation for this early sighting might be that the exceptionally early advent of warm weather, together with the recent abundant rainfall, produced soft probing grounds in upland areas. These are normally too hard for woodcock feeding.—Allen Ratzlaff, *Department of Zoology, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078, 25 February 1986.*

Observations of Belted Kingfishers.—Though the Belted Kingfisher (*Ceryle alcyon*) is a highly visible year-round resident in most areas of Oklahoma, little has been documented about its behavior other than its nesting and fishing habits. Four unrelated observations in Washington County, north-eastern Oklahoma, have prompted me to search the literature for similar incidents. The most informative reference was A. C. Bent's *Life Histories of North American Birds* (1940, Bull. U.S. Natl. Mus. 176, Pt. 1, pp. 111-129).

On 12 June 1985 Ella Delap observed three kingfishers "dive-bombing" a Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) on a farm pond close to the Caney River northwest of Dewey. At least one of these birds was an adult, but she could not be sure of the age of the other two. Another incident involving a heron occurred on 3 November 1985. A kingfisher gave its characteristic loud "rattling" call as it flew low over our pond about 150 feet from Hogshooter Creek, and a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) that had been standing motionless at the water's edge, immediately flew away. Dr. Steve Sherrod of the Sutton Avian Research Center in Bartlesville reports that on more than one occasion, kingfishers have also attacked falcons he had just released.

At my home on Hogshooter Creek 6 miles east of Bartlesville, I was watching my two youngest daughters play in their wading pool on our back patio about 200 feet east of the creek on 10 July 1985, when suddenly, a female kingfisher flew up from the creek and dived headlong into the wading pool. This frightened the children, who began screaming. The kingfisher, after knocking down a nearby hummingbird feeder, plunged feet-first into the birdbath, then made a hasty retreat back toward the creek. Never did it give the usual rattling noise, but throughout the entire incident uttered a shrill, high-pitched "chee, chee, chee" that sounded like a cross between the call of a Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) and a gull (Williams, F., 1985, *Amer. Birds* 39:932).

The reason for this seemingly erratic behavior has been much speculated. Dr. Sherrod suggested that the kingfisher might have been flushed from the creek by a Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), and seeing the water in the wading pool, plunged into it for safety. Sherrod, in his extensive work with falcons, has noted that kingfishers often attract hunting Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) because the kingfisher's peculiar flight pattern resembles that of a wounded bird.

Dr. David McIntosh of Bartlesville Wesleyan College speculated that the

kingfisher could have eaten contaminated fish and become disoriented. My personal thought is that the bird might have simply been young and inexperienced and the screaming children added to its confusion. Another alternative is that perhaps the bright blue wading pool, with green turtles painted on the bottom, was simply more appealing than the water of the sluggish creek. Dr. George M. Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 291) has written: . . . "when it flies into towns, it usually makes the round of fountains and flower-rimmed pools whose goldfish it captures or relieves, for a glorious moment, of boredom."

On 2 February 1986 (an unusually warm, humid day) I observed a pair of kingfishers wheeling and circling high above Hogshooter Creek, much like soaring Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*). They were vocalizing in yet another manner . . . not the usual rattle or the shrill "chee, chee, chee," but in a soft staccato kind of gurgle. They circled erratically and "gurgled" for approximately five minutes, then began to chase each other in and out of the tall sycamores lining the creek. This activity was kept up for at least five minutes. When they spied me, they flew north up the creek, this time "rattling" normally. I believe that what I had watched was probably courtship behavior.

Although Bent (1940, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112) stated that "very little seems to be known about the kingfisher's courtship," he cited Laurence B. Potter as follows: "Sometimes I have watched as many as five or six high up in the air, tumbling and wheeling about, uttering their harsh rattle; they appear to be doing it merely for the joy of flying, or it may be their courtship antics" and Francis H. Allen, who wrote: "From courting birds — a group of them — I have heard a mewling note uttered in rapid succession, almost if not quite as loud as the familiar rattle of the species." The February pair I observed did not seem to rattle or mew, but their "gurgle" could have been my interpretation of it.

Bent (1940, *op. cit.*, p. 124) mentions one further sound that I have never heard from a Belted Kingfisher: "the whining note like two tree branches rubbing together . . . or as Brewster calls it the anger note cah-car-car-car." Perhaps other observers can add more information about the behavior, courtship and vocalizations of this interesting species. — Melinda Droege, Rt. 1, Box 516AA, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74006, 13 February 1986.

FROM THE EDITOR.—A major paper in Oklahoma ornithology has been published in Volume 66 (1986) of the Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Science (pp. 15-20). James W. Lish and Steve K. Sherrod collaborated to write "A history of Bald Eagle nesting activity in Oklahoma." Using historical records dating back to 1823, they cite early accounts of the species in Oklahoma during the breeding season, but most of these are sketchy and incomplete. The 13 recent nesting attempts (since the early 1950's) are much better documented and have all occurred at five localities in the eastern half of the state, near large bodies of water. Only three of these attempts (23%) were successful, and altogether only four young eagles have fledged.

An inadvertant omission of acknowledgment should be corrected: thanks to Sam Orr of Lawton who photographed the Black Scoters for the March, 1987 lead paper.

Finally, the editors are especially indebted to Tammy Mosher and Mary Anne Moore of Cameron University for their unstinting work in typing the manuscripts. — Jack D. Tyler.