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YELLOW-BILLED LOON: FIRST SIGHTING IN OKLAHOMA

BY JO LOYD AND PATRICIA SEIBERT

At approximately 1330 on 11 December 1988, while studying ducks at Lake Yahola, a city reservoir in Mohawk Park, 6 miles northeast of Tulsa, Tulsa County, Oklahoma, we noticed a loon unfamiliar to us. Its very light head and pale bill first brought the bird to our attention. The loon was actively feeding in the center of the 425-acre reservoir and for two hours we observed it, at distances ranging from 25 to 150 yards and from several locations along the edge of the lake. We noted extensive white on its face, throat, foreneck and breast. Its cap was quite dark, the nape and hindneck a shade lighter. The back was dark brownish-gray and the scapular feathers had pale edgings, giving the loon a "scalloped" appearance. Around and above the dark eye was a light area and a small darkish patch could be seen behind it. Upper and lower mandibles were yellow except for the basal third of the upper, which was grayish. The head, held at an upward tilt, gave the bill an upturned appearance.

A Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) was feeding nearby, allowing a good comparison of size, shape and coloration between the two birds. Compared to it, the loon we were studying appeared to be larger and more thick-necked. Its yellow bill also contrasted with that of the Common Loon, which was noticeably

YELLOW-BILLED LOON

Numerous observers studied this bird at Lake Yahola in Tulsa, Tulsa County, Oklahoma, from 11 December 1988 to 6 January 1989. Photo taken by Steve Metz on 20 December 1988.

darker and smaller.

Identification of the bird as a Yellow-billed Loon (*Gavia adamsii*) was made after we had consulted several field guides and other works. Peter Harrison (1985, Seabirds, an identification guide, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, p. 211) wrote: "White-billed Divers [Yellow-billed Loons] in winter months [are] best separated at all ages by white culmen, and distinct pale-headed appearance — an excellent field character visible at considerable range. By comparison Great Northern [Common Loon] usually have a black culmen with darker head and neck markings extending well below level of eye." After studying Harrison's illustrations (plate 6, p. 34) and his text, we believe that the bird we saw was a first-winter Yellow-billed Loon. A description written by Ralph S. Palmer (1962, Handbook of North American birds, Vol. I, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, Conn., pp. 37–38) supplements this conclusion. Palmer stated: "The slightly uptilted bill usually separates it [Yellow-billed Loon] from the Common . . . the white of cheeks a bit more extensive (usually to or slightly above eye)."

That evening we called Jim Hoffman, who on 12 December saw the bird and concurred with our identification, as did John Tomer, Steve Metz and Bob Jennings. The loon was observed on a daily basis by many persons until 20 December 1988 and again reported on 24 December by Terry Mitchell and on 2 and 6 January 1989 by Bob Jennings. John Tomer took definitive photographs on 14 December. Others taken by George Hansen on 20 December 1988 show the Yellow-billed and the Common Loon together, and one by Steve Metz on the same date is shown on the front cover. Photos are filed with the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee.

The Yellow-billed Loon is "primarily [a] Eurasian species . . . and its migration routes are only partially known" (Palmer, 1962, *op. cit.*, p. 38). In North America, the normal winter range for the Yellow-billed Loon is off the Pacific coast, primarily southeast Alaska to British Columbia, with occasional sightings as far south as Baja California (Don Roberson, 1980, Rare birds of the West Coast of North America, Woodcock Publ., Pacific Grove, California). The American Ornithologists' Union (Check-List of North American birds, 6th ed., 1983) indicated the same winter range and referred to casual occurrences in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nevada and New York. There have been a number of recent sightings in the continental United States. According to published reports in American Birds there have been five since 1986: Idaho, March 1986; Illinois, December 1986; Montana, January 1987; Michigan, May 1987; and Minnesota, October 1988.

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BREEDING STATUS OF THE BLACK-NECKED STILT IN THE TEXAS PANHANDLE

BY KENNETH D. SEYFFERT

The first reported nesting of the Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) in the Texas Panhandle was that of A.S. Hawkins (1945, Bird life of the Texas Panhandle, Panhandle Plains Hist. Rev. 8:133–134). On 16 June 1945, he and a man named Thompson found a nest containing four eggs in

northwestern Armstrong County. The nest was on a three-foot embankment along a dirt road that bisected a "wet weather" lake. By 4 July the eggs had hatched. The young were seen for the first time on 6 August when they were fully grown and able to fly. It would be 32 years before nesting activity was reported again.

Sightings of the Black-necked Stilt since have been intermittent, uncommon, and restricted to migratory seasons (2 April–9 May; 9–30 September). It was not until 1973 that a summer sighting was again recorded. I discovered a pair of stilts on the Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Randall County on 2 June 1973. Although I saw them again on 16 and 30 June and on 15 July, I observed no indications of nesting. Not long afterward, the lake was drained because of highly polluted water and a faulty spillway and an earthern dike was constructed at the upper end of the refuge, creating a pool of some 300 surface acres. It was here in 1977 that I observed 3, 2, 1, 2 and 2 Black-necked Stilts respectively on 8, 14, 22 and 29 May and on 5 June. On 19 June and 4 July, a pair engaged in distraction displays, attacking me and calling loudly as though a nest or young were nearby. I could not locate a nest, but during mid-July acting refuge manager Larry Wynn observed two small juvenile stilts there (Williams, F., 1977, Amer. Birds 31:1156).

In 1978, in the same area, I observed a single adult stilt on 30 July and four on 13 August, at which time two of the birds circled about me giving loud alarm calls. I returned on 27 August and found one adult with two well-grown juveniles. When pursued, the young birds did not fly but ran instead. On 3 September I found two adults with two chicks, presumably the same ones seen previously, although this time the young birds flew short distances when chased. On 4 September, three adults were present, together with two immature birds. During this same summer, three to four adult stilts were seen several times at a playa lake near the southern outskirts of Amarillo in Randall County (*fide* Peggy Acord and Rena Ross). It was strongly suspected that these birds were nesting because they often attacked the observers, even when they remained in their cars.

In 1978 the earthern dike at the Buffalo Lake Refuge was breached by floodwaters, but the lake was full once again in 1979. I observed various numbers of stilts there during the summer, up to 29 on 4 July. These birds were congregated at the shallow upper end where a remnant of the dike remained. They engaged in much alarm activity, attacking me vigorously when I entered the area. On 5 August I noted at least three young among the 15 stilts I saw that day.

In 1981, at a small cattle feedlot pond west of Hereford, Deaf Smith County, I found a pair of adults with three well-grown young on 19 July. The three immature birds, approximately the size of the adults, had orange legs and brownish backs with buffy feather edgings. It is possible that they were hatched elsewhere. The pool of water was adjacent to a paved secondary road on the north and surrounded on the remaining three sides by embankments.

In 1984, at the aforementioned playa lake south of Amarillo, I observed four half-grown juvenile stilts with three adults on 4 and 8 September. The adults had been seen there all summer by Peggy Acord, Rena Ross and me. The fact that we had noticed no young birds earlier was not surprising because

the playa was thickly covered with emergent vegetation. The young stilts would not have been readily noticeable until they had grown tall enough to appear above the high weeds.

In 1985, Peggy Acord and I found a pair of Black-necked Stilts with three downy chicks on a playa lake bisected by U.S. Highway 60 about 3½ miles southwest of White Deer in Carson County. The birds were in a small shallow arm of the playa on the south side of the road embankment. Nearby was a pair of American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*) with two downy chicks. On 21 July 1985, at another playa in westcentral Swisher County, a pair engaged in distraction displays consisting of wing fluttering and flapping with their bodies bent forward, and squatting on the ground as though settling on a nest; all the while, they uttered low nasal calls. I found neither nest nor young, but the pair continued these actions as long as I remained in the area. Prior to this performance I had watched the pair attack and chase an American Avocet. This lake was bisected by a dirt road, inundated near the center by high water, and contained some emergent vegetation.

The only other reference to the nesting of Black-necked Stilts in the Texas Panhandle is that of D.H. Fischer, *et al.* (1985 [for 1982], Checklist of birds from playa lakes of the southern Texas Panhandle, Bull. Texas Ornithol. Soc. 15:4). They classified the species as a "spring, fall migrant and summer resident" recorded from 3 May to 16 August, with nesting in Parmer, Castro and Swisher counties, but provided no other details. In nearby Union County, New Mexico, J.P. Hubbard (1978, Revised check-list of the birds of New Mexico, New Mexico Ornithol. Soc. Publ. No. 6, p. 27) recorded occasional nesting near Clayton.

Between 1977 and 1984 (4 June to 28 August) I have observed summering Black-necked Stilts at other locations in the Texas Panhandle, but none gave evidence of nesting. These sites were in Randall, Hansford, Briscoe and Castro counties. One lake in westcentral Hansford County was only 16 miles south of Texas County, Oklahoma.

Two characteristics common to these localities where details of nesting habitat are given were the presence of a dike or embankment and of emergent vegetation. The Armstrong County site of 1945, the Randall County lake in 1984 and the Carson and Swisher County playas in 1985 were all bisected by roads, and the 1981 Deaf Smith County lake had a road embankment on one side and dirt embankments on the other three. The Buffalo Lake Refuge sites of 1977, 1978 and 1979 all involved an earthen dike. It is interesting to note that the Blaine County, Oklahoma, location that contained several Black-necked Stilts on 24 May and 2 June 1983 was located next to a highway ". . . where the road traversed a playa lake. . . ." (Davis, W.M., 1985, Black-necked Stilts in Oklahoma during May and June, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 18:13–14). It may well be that these road embankments and dikes provide nesting sites that are stable and relatively safe from rises in water levels. Adjacent waters, laden with emergent vegetation, are fresher than that of the typical playa lake, which often encompasses many acres of shallow water devoid of vegetation and tends to become highly alkaline through evaporation. R.B. Hamilton (1975, Comparative behavior of the American Avocet and the Black-necked Stilt (Recurvirostridae), A.O.U. Ornithol. Monogr. No. 17, p. 14) found

that "the literature indicates rather clearly that stilts prefer fresh-water habitats and avocets prefer alkaline or saline habitats" and that "stilts tended to be found in areas where some emergent vegetation existed." The stilt nests of that study were all placed on man-made dikes. Particular attention should be paid such man-modified playa lakes while searching for nesting Black-necked Stilts in other areas of the Texas Panhandle and in Oklahoma.

2206 S. LIPSCOMB ST., AMARILLO, TEXAS 79109, 1 AUGUST 1985.

A recent Cooper's Hawk nest in Osage County, Oklahoma. — Since the discovery by John L. Schwabe of a Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) nest that held four eggs on 13 May 1936 in the Osage Hills, there are no breeding records known for Osage County, Oklahoma (see Schwabe, 1940, Amer. Midl. Natr. 24:209–212 and Sutton, 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci & Hist., Norman, p. 9). This nest was 30 feet up in a large post oak (*Quercus stellata*) and all four eggs hatched in June. Interestingly, Osage-naturalist John J. Mathews, who wrote of the depression years in the Osage Hills, frequently (though disparagingly) mentioned the Cooper's Hawk and its young (1945, Talking to the moon, Univ. Chicago Press). But since the Bartlesville Audubon Society began keeping records in 1960, not a single instance of breeding has been reported for Osage County.

On a private ranch near the town of Bowring in northeast Osage County, trees were being bulldozed on 25 June 1985 to make way for an oil drilling rig when the lease operator saw a nest in a felled oak (*Quercus* sp.) approximately 30 feet tall. The nest contained five Cooper's Hawk nestlings and was about 20 feet up from the roots. No adult hawk was ever seen. This tree had stood 50 feet from a small stream along which grew typical bottomland species: cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*), sycamores (*Platanus occidentalis*), elms (*Ulmus* spp.) and several mature oaks.

The young birds were placed in a box and eventually taken to Bertta Snell, a licensed rehabilitator in Bartlesville. One nestling was already dead. She guessed that the other four were about four weeks old. On 28 June 1985, three of these died, but the largest and healthiest survived. Until its release on 21 July, it thrived on a diet of mealworms and mice. The young accipiter returned to the Snell residence for mice made available to it until 3 August, after which date it was seen no more.

The widespread use of the insecticide DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro ethane) and several other chlorinated hydrocarbon poisons may explain in part the virtual absence of nesting Cooper's Hawks in Osage County for the past 50 years. Many of these persistent poisons were banned from use in the United States in the early 1970s. Already in 1985, more summer sightings of this hawk have been recorded than in the previous five years (Bartlesville Audubon Society records). — Melinda Droege, *Rt. 1, Box 516AA, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74006, 13 February 1986.*

A summer record for the Osprey in Sequoyah County, Oklahoma. — At 0930 on 31 July 1986, Steve Hardin and I saw an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) at Lake Tenkiller, Sequoyah County, eastcentral Oklahoma. We were fishing

from a boat in a quiet cove of the lake, when all at once we noticed a large raptor perched on a dead snag only about 50 feet away. After studying the bird carefully enough for positive identification, we rowed slowly toward it until the Osprey flushed. It was white below, dark above and the dark line through its eye was easily distinguishable against the whitish head.

G.M. Sutton (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 11) mentioned midsummer records (2 June to 31 July) for Cherokee, Payne, Alfalfa and Comanche counties and fall dates from 21 August to 16 December. Active Osprey nests at Salt Plains Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County and at Robert S. Kerr Reservoir in Sequoyah County were reported by Loyd D. Isley and James W. Lish (1986, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 19:2–3). These are the only breeding records known for the state, but both are incompletely documented. The bird reported herein may have been an early migrant, but the species is to be watched for in summer near large reservoirs and river systems, for it could conceivably nest almost anywhere in Oklahoma. — Donald J. McMahon III, *Rt. 1, Box 50, Fort Gibson, Oklahoma 74434, 9 August 1986.*

Additional Eastern Screech-Owl records for southeastern Oklahoma. — Although it is true that few records for the Eastern Screech-Owl in southeastern Oklahoma have been published, a statement made by one of us in a recent note (Stewart, M.E., 1989, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 22:7–8) is incorrect. It implied that only two records were known: a specimen at the University of New Mexico that was collected near Page in LeFlore County on 4 October 1919 and an owl Stewart photographed on the night of 19 March 1983 in northern McCurtain County. Several additional records have recently come to the authors' attention.

During the summers of 1961 and 1962, W.A. Carter regularly observed three red-phased screech-owls on the McCurtain Game Preserve in McCurtain County (1965, Ecology of the summer nesting birds of the McCurtain Game Preserve, Ph.D. Diss., Oklahoma State Univ., Stillwater, p. 41). In the same area, J.L. and Marion Norman saw a single bird near Broken Bow Reservoir on 1 January 1967 (1967, Aud. Field Notes 21:297). Also in McCurtain County, G.T. Rogers heard screech-owls calling on the nights of 12–14 September 1944 at Cedar Creek Lake near Heavener (Sutton, G.M., [1982], Species summaries of bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Norman) and on 27 October 1975, D.S. Wood found a dead male bird (UOMZ 8689) 8 miles east and 13 south of Idabel (D.S. Wood letter of 27 April 1989 to M.E. Stewart).

Stewart has recently been transferred from southwestern Oklahoma to the Ouachita Wildlife Management Area (also known as the Holson Valley Game Management Area) in southern Leflore County. Since his arrival, he has had the good fortune to encounter Eastern Screech-Owls on three occasions in this county. On or about 11 June 1988, a red-phase bird struck his truck as he drove through the town of Poteau. It recovered a few moments later and was set free. Another owl he found dead 12 February 1989 on Post Mountain, 3 miles south and 5½ west of Hodgen, was decapitated and so badly damaged by traffic that it was unsalvageable. Then on 20 April 1989, a photograph of a live screech-owl

that had been brought by a house cat into the James A. Johnson house 12 miles south of Heavener on 14 April 1989 appeared in the Heavener Ledger (Vol. 85, No. 16, p. 9). After examining it for injuries, the Johnsons released it, apparently none the worse for its ordeal.

Two older LeFlore County records should be mentioned. At Wister Reservoir near Heavener, J.L. Norman saw a screech-owl on 7 August 1949 and heard another on 12 May 1950 (Sutton [1982], *op. cit.*). — M. Earl Stewart, *P.O. Box 101, Hodgen, Oklahoma 74939, and* Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 2 May 1989.*

Carolina Chickadee trapped in nestbox. — Carolina Chickadees (*Parus carolinensis*) are abundant residents of the oak-hickory woods surrounding my home near Hogshooter Creek, Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma. On 8 May 1988 the loud fussing and buzzing of a pair caught my attention. The birds' activities centered around a small plastic birdhouse that hung about six feet above the ground within 20 feet of my carport. This birdhouse had been ignored for years by all the birds in the area, so I was therefore surprised to hear scratching and thumping sounds inside. When I tried to peer into the entrance hole, however, I found the view completely blocked. Upon closer inspection, I could see that the hole was covered from the inside by a paper wasp's (*Vespula* sp.) nest. The nest appeared old and devoid of life. What then was causing the noise and activity around the birdhouse?

As I gingerly moved the wasp nest from the entrance, a young chickadee burst from the hole, brushed past my nose and fluttered to a tree limb approximately five feet away. Immediately, the adult chickadees flew to its side. The trio then disappeared together into the underbrush.

Inside the birdhouse, I found a chickadee nest composed primarily of moss and Angora rabbit fur (from our pet rabbit) densely packed to within 1 cm of the hole entrance. The wasp nest had originally hung from the highest point inside the birdhouse. Clearance between the wasp nest and the bird nest was 4.8 cm. Sometime during the nesting season, the wasp nest must have been knocked loose and eventually covered the entrance hole, trapping the young chickadee.

The next day I observed a family of chickadees (two adults and at least three young) within 100 feet of the nest area, suggesting that other nestlings had fledged without difficulty. This incident points out the importance of checking and cleaning birdhouses every year, even those that weren't previously occupied.

Human intervention to aid trapped nestlings has been reported for Cliff Swallows (*Hirundo pyrrhonota*) entrapped by buildup of their own excrement at a nest entrance hole (Stoddard, P.K., 1983, Wils. Bull. 95:674–5). — Bonnie Gall, *Rt. 1, Box 517F, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74006, 15 May 1988.*

Gray Catbird in Tulsa County, Oklahoma, in winter. — Early on the afternoon of 22 January, 1985, a pleasant, sunny day, Terry Mitchell and I were searching for birds along Green Dragon Trail at the Oxley Nature Center in northeast Tulsa, Oklahoma, when our attention was drawn to an unfamiliar

bird call. As we searched the undergrowth and low trees, only to discover that the unusual notes had come from a Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*), we happened to notice a dark bird sitting quietly in a tree about 80 feet away. It was gray throughout, save for its reddish undertail coverts and black cap, which we could clearly see through our binoculars. We both agreed that it was a Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*), a species that, after conferring with Bob Jennings at the nature center, we found to be transient statewide and that breeds chiefly across northern Oklahoma. According to Sutton ([1982], Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. His., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman), there are three prior winter records for Tulsa County (21 and 22 December, 2 March) and one each in Washington and Alfalfa counties (30 December and 1 January, respectively). — Scott Dingman, *P.O. Box 4748, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74159, 12 December 1985.*

Early spring record for Dickcissel in Comanche County, Oklahoma. — At 1800 on the exceptionally early date of 17 March 1985, while driving east along South Boundary Road on the East Range of the Fort Sill Military Reservation in Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma, Sam Orr and I noticed a small flock of sparrow-like birds moving along a line of Osage orange trees (*Maclura pomifera*) just ahead of our vehicle. We stopped and watched them from about 50 feet for 20 to 30 seconds through a Bushnell 25X spotting scope and 7-power binoculars. We counted six birds, but were having difficulty identifying them in the orange cast of twilight. Finally, one perched on an outer limb, facing west, where we could clearly see its yellow chest with black bib and bright chestnut-colored shoulders. We knew immediately that these birds were Dickcissels (*Spiza americana*), a species that regularly summers in Oklahoma.

For southwestern Oklahoma, J.D. Tyler (1979, Birds of southwestern Oklahoma, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 49) reported 22 April as the earliest spring date. Unseasonably warm late winter weather may have contributed to this untimely arrival.

Sutton ([1982], Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman) listed eight winter records. Four were in Washington County, two in Tulsa County and one in Muskogee County, all in northeastern Oklahoma. The other was in central Oklahoma, in McClain County. One of the Tulsa birds overwintered, having been noted from November 1969 to March 1970. — Allen Ratzlaff, *923 W. 4th St., Stillwater, Oklahoma, 74074, 22 July 1985.*

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