

**THE ROSEATE SPOONBILL IN OKLAHOMA**

BY JOHN S. SHACKFORD

The range of the Roseate Spoonbill (*Ajaia ajaja*), according to The American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American birds (1983), is "... from northern Sinaloa, the Gulf coast of Texas and southwestern Louisiana . . . , and southern Florida south along both coasts of Middle America and through the Greater Antilles . . . Bahamas . . . and South America to central Chile and central Argentina." It was formerly common "in Florida and all along the Gulf coast to Texas" (Bent 1926). Scott (1889), wrote that "The roseate spoonbill was 10 years ago an abundant bird on the Gulf Coast of Florida." However, beginning about the turn of the century the species was hunted extensively for its pink wings which were sold as ladies' fans; by the 1920s the species was "making its last stand in a few remote and isolated localities" in the United States (Bent op. cit.). As recently as 1939 only "a single tiny colony of 15 pairs" existed in Florida (Allen 1962).



**ROSEATE SPOONBILL**

*An immature bird photographed on 20 July 1987 at Northeast Lake, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma, by John S. Shackford. In addition to the pink feathers on the wing and lower back, note especially the white feathers on most of the head. The head is largely naked in adults.*

Fortunately, the species has, with legal protection, made a remarkable comeback in the United States. Brian Chapman, ornithologist with the Oklahoma Natural Heritage Inventory, spent 17 years working with colonial nesting birds, including the spoonbill, along the Texas coast. He stated that there are now thousands of nesting pairs of spoonbills along the coast (pers. comm., 1991). Estimates in the late 1970s of the numbers of nesting pairs in Texas were 2500 (Texas Colonial Waterbird Society 1982), in southwestern Louisiana 1300 (Portnoy 1977) and in Florida 1400 (Robertson et al. 1983).

In Oklahoma, Sutton (1967) referred to the spoonbill as a "summer and fall visitant from June 30 to October 13." It was first recorded on 15 October 1940 by J.G. Harlow who saw an immature bird feeding along the east side of a "settling basin" just north of Lake Overholser, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. County, dates of sightings and number of spoonbills seen (in parentheses) in the state since then were: Alfalfa, 30 June 3-July 1960 (1), 3 September 1965 (2); Choctaw, 1 August 1959 (4 collected); Cleveland, 14 September 1972 (1); Comanche, 22 August-12 September 1979 (1); Garfield, 7 July 1968 (1 captured and taken to Enid City Zoo); Johnston, 9 and 17 September 1958 (1), 9 September 1971 (3); Oklahoma, 16 August 1952 (1), 5-18 September 1960 (1-4), 3 August 1974 (1); Tillman, 10-13 October 1955 (1); and Tulsa, 6 July (4) and 7 July 1960 (7) (Sutton [1982]). Most of these birds were near large bodies of water.

Since 1982, *Ajaia ajaja* has been reported from several additional locations. In 1984, Nanette Erickson (1986) found two spoonbills and five Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) feeding together on 26 August in a flooded field along the Deep Fork River in Lincoln County. Many other observers saw them at various times until 3 September. Although these spoonbills lacked the crimson shoulder patches characteristic of fully mature birds, they had dark legs and bills and their coloration was similar to the adult winter plumage described by Bent (1926 op. cit.). The fact that there were two birds, possibly a pair, also strengthened Erickson's contention that they might have been adults, none of which had ever before been reported in Oklahoma.

On 17 July 1987 Ernest E. Wilson found a spoonbill in immature plumage at Northeast Lake, located adjacent to the Oklahoma City Zoo, in Oklahoma County. A check with zoo personnel revealed that no Roseate Spoonbill had recently been in captivity at the zoo, therefore this bird was obviously wild. It remained there for approximately a week; several local observers studied it at length before its departure. The lake had been partially drained. The spoonbill, along with about 20 semi-tame ducks, was apparently attracted by the shallow water, where I watched it probe for about 20 minutes. Its method of feeding was to sift its bill from side to side at or near the bottom. I photographed the spoonbill on 20 July and one of my photos (see cover) appeared in *The Daily Oklahoman* on 29 July 1987. Later that same year, a bird with pink back and wings (probably immature) was discovered by Jo Loyd and Pat Seibert on 7 September along the Arkansas River near Bixby in Tulsa County. This bird was viewed by several persons during the ensuing three days (Grzybowski 1988).

In northwestern Creek County, an apparent immature spoonbill was observed by Pat Seibert, Jo Loyd and others. It was pale pink and had yellowish legs. This one appeared on the Cimarron River arm of Keystone Reservoir at

the State Highway 48 bridge on 13 and 14 August 1989 (Grzybowski 1990).

At Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge in eastcentral Oklahoma, Roy Callison found a pink spoonbill about 0900 on 18 August 1989, a calm, clear day. It was 75 yards away, feeding in the aforementioned fashion. Callison notified Craig Heflebower and Bernice DeSantos, Assistant Refuge Managers, of the spoonbill. Heflebower, after laboriously crawling through dense aquatic vegetation, saw it from only several feet away. As it flew off, DeSantos noticed darker red areas on the wings, indicating that this spoonbill was probably an adult.

After nesting along the coast, at least a few Roseate Spoonbills wander northward. The species is "Casual or accidental north to . . . Colorado, Nebraska, southeastern Kansas [and] Arkansas . . ." (AOU 1983 op. cit.) In Florida, Scott (1889 op. cit.) observed that "immediately after the breeding season was finished, . . . there was a great dispersal of birds to the northward, particularly along the coast, though they were common at points in the interior." Chapman (pers. comm., 1991) believes that most individuals that arrive in Oklahoma originate from the Texas colonies. Because of the increased nesting success that this species has recently experienced along the Gulf coast, Oklahomans may encounter it more often in the future as some birds move northward, particularly during the postbreeding period, i.e., late summer and early fall.

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## GENERAL NOTES

**Exceptionally large numbers of Common Loons on Lake Tenkiller, Oklahoma.**—According to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 5), the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) is a transient and winter visitant recorded in Oklahoma from 1 September to 22 May.

In recent years, a large concentration of Common Loons has been observed on Lake Tenkiller, Sequoyah County, in far eastcentral Oklahoma. On 30 March 1989, James L. Norman and I counted an incredible 120 loons on just one section of the lake. Some of these birds were in breeding plumage, a few were calling.

In 1990 we visited the lake during the months of January, February and March. On 17 January, Norman, Elsie M. Stubbs and I tallied 35 to 40 loons. There were more than 100 on 14 February. Norman, Mike Mlodinow and I returned on 17 February. We set up our spotting scopes in the cold clear winter air and counted from our mutual vantage point. After five minutes, our total that morning was 133. Almost certainly, other loons were scattered over the lake in places out of our view. At dusk on 16 March, Norman, Stubbs, James C. Hoffman and I observed 129. The loons seemed to be converging at a specific location on the lake, probably for the night. This made counting much easier. Some of the loons on this date were in breeding plumage.

Nothing comparable to these large concentrations has ever been reported in Oklahoma. Sutton ([1982], Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman) mentioned that "about 20" were seen on Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City by J. Vic Vacin on 6 November 1964 (1965, Aud. Field Notes 19:54). Another aggregation of "about 20" was observed by John G. Newell on the same lake from 1 December 1986 to 28 February 1987 (Amer. Birds 41:297, 1987). — Jeri A. McMahon, *Rt. 1, Box 689, Ft. Gibson, Oklahoma 74434, 18 January 1991.*

**Nesting status of the Pied-billed Grebe in Tulsa County, Oklahoma.**—While compiling field report summaries for the Tulsa Audubon Society, we noticed a pattern in the Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) records. Those from 1980 through October, 1990 show the highest number of reports for April and August, with a few sightings from May through July. According to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman) this species is listed as a transient and common winter resident in Tulsa County. But in recent years, several field reports contained references to chicks or immature birds. Fred Pianalto found a female with five chicks on a pond in the western part of Tulsa County on 29 April 1987. Three days later, Aline and Forrest Romero saw a hen and six chicks in the same general area, possibly the same brood. James Arterburn reported five immature grebes in the south part of the county in May of 1987. Pianalto discovered two broods in May 1988 at the same west Tulsa County pond in which he had found young birds the previous year. One of these contained four chicks, the other five, and both were attended by the adult female grebe. Immature grebes did not show up on any field report for 1989; however, a few adult grebes were recorded during May, June and July.

Tulsa Audubon Society records do not reflect actual nests reported. Sutton

(1967 op. cit.) specified 15 May as the earliest nesting date in Oklahoma. The status of this species as a transient in Tulsa County, lack of nest records and the early recent reports of chicks led us to conduct additional research.

Nice (1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, rev. ed., Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv. Vol. 3, No. 1) referred to Pied-billed Grebe eggs collected at Sperry Lake in northwest Tulsa County on 10 June 1923, by George M. Morse. Oxley Nature Center in Tulsa has these eggs in its collection.

On 21 April 1990, at 145th East Avenue and East 52nd Street North, the courtship calls of Pied-billed Grebes led us to our first observation of a nesting platform. The pair was adding debris to the nest that contained one egg. They were dredging debris from the floor of a pool of flood water in a stand of young willow trees. The depth of the pool was estimated at 18 to 24 inches. The grebes repeatedly sank and resurfaced with large amounts of decaying vegetation in their bills. When they became aware of our presence, they covered the egg with nest material and sank from sight. We visited the nest again on 9 May and found one grebe on the nest, but were unable to determine if there was more than one egg. On 19 May the nest was flattened but intact, but no grebe was seen. On 2 June we discovered that the original nest was no longer being used; however, a second nest had been built. This one was much better concealed in the willows and was approximately 10 feet beyond the original. Two weeks later, no grebes were present. We assumed that the birds had abandoned the site because of disruptive heavy utility construction less than 200 feet away.

While watching herons and egrets in a flooded field on 5 May 1990, we discovered another pair of Pied-bills that were constructing a nest. This one was near South Sheridan Street, roughly ½ mile south of 121st Street South. On additional trips there, we found a grebe sitting on the nest until 30 May. On 2 June an adult (presumed to be the female) and three downy chicks were on the nest. Another grebe was nearby. As we watched, the female took the chicks into the water where they climbed onto her back; she then hid in the weeds a short distance from the nest. In this same field, James Arterburn noted nine immature grebes in June, 1990, indicating the success of possibly as many as three nests: Reilly (1968, *The Audubon illustrated handbook of American birds*, McGraw-Hill, N. Y.) indicated that the species may lay as many as 10 eggs, but usually 4-7. This information led us to conclude that Pied-billed Grebes are currently nesting and have done so historically in Tulsa County. Their secretive behavior near the nest site is probably a major reason for the lack of recent reports during May, June and July in Tulsa County and may go far in explaining why the species has not previously been considered a summer resident.—Patricia Seibert, 2145 South Florence Ave., Tulsa, Oklahoma 74114, and Jo Loyd, 6736 East 28th St., Tulsa, Oklahoma 74129, 13 December 1990.

**Great Blue Heron caught on fish hook.**—On 15 October 1990, as I was travelling by boat up Otter Creek near its confluence with Tom Steed Reservoir in Kiowa County, Oklahoma, I noticed a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) sprawled in the edge of the water. The day was mild and sunny, the time about 1400. During previous fishing trips, I had occasionally flushed this or another Great Blue near this same spot. At my approach, the large bird vigorously

flapped its wings and kicked in an attempt to retreat, but made no headway. This commotion shook several nearby bushes. Puzzled, I drew closer. Despite the bird's repeated attempts to spear me with its immense bill, I grabbed its long legs. It was only then that I discovered the cause of its plight: a large trotline-size hook suspended at the end of a limb line hanging above the water's edge had impaled its right foot between two toes. I severed the hook with pliers and removed it, freeing the heron. Rather than flying away, it "wobbled" off into the nearby vegetation. I assumed that the bird was fatigued and/or starved enough that it lacked the strength to fly. There seemed to be no other physical injuries. Whether or not it survived I cannot say.—Earl Shaw, 1010 10th St., Snyder, Oklahoma 73566, 15 November 1990.

**Sandhill Crane in Oklahoma in midsummer.**—At approximately 1945 on 9 July 1990, a clear, still evening, I heard the familiar call of a Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) coming from a flood pond not far from my house 3 miles north and 4 miles east of Anadarko, Caddo County, Oklahoma. Through my binocular and telescope I could see the crane standing in the edge of the water 500–600 yards away. The pond was surrounded by fields of wheat stubble. I watched the bird until dark, about 2050.

Next day, I again saw the crane standing quietly in about the same place at 0635. Twenty minutes later, it began to call. By 0735, it had begun to chase insects among dense growths of pigweed in the nearby wheat stubble. I watched off and on all day, and it remained until at least 1830, when I left for dinner.

On 11 July, the huge bird had moved eastward  $\frac{1}{3}$  mile to a neighbor's pond. It was cloudy when I saw the crane at 0845 and the temperature was 78°F. There were several large sandbars in this pond, which also was encompassed by weedy wheat stubble.

I heard the crane once more on 13 July in the floodplain of the Washita River, approximately a mile south of my house. Here, it loitered on mudflats between several flood pools. My pond had now dried up.

Why this bird was in Oklahoma in the middle of summer is puzzling. It appeared to be healthy and flew well. There is apparently no previous summer record for the state (Sutton, G. M., [1982], Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman). At this time of year, it should have been on the breeding grounds in the northern reaches of the continent. Some birds are resident in the southeastern United States (American Ornithologists Union, 1983, Check-list of North American birds, 6th ed., p.162) and this individual might have wandered (or been blown?) northwestward to Oklahoma. Its exact provenance will never be determined.—Bud Exendine, Rt. 1, Box 137, Anadarko, Oklahoma 73005, 15 September 1990.

**A new bird for Oklahoma: Calliope Hummingbird.**—On 22 July 1989, at the Cimarron River near the eastern end of Black Mesa in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, we were sitting quietly by our van eating lunch when we noticed a male hummingbird feeding from thistle (*Cirsium* sp.) flowers nearby. One of us (DJR) recognized it almost immediately as a Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*). For perhaps a total of 15 minutes we watched it systematically visit

the lavender flowers during our 40-minute stay. Our presence did not seem to disturb the bird.

We observed it through Minolta wide-angle 10× and 8× binoculars from as close as 27 feet (paced) and as far away as an estimated 60–75 feet. The day was bright and sunny. We were in shade, as was the hummingbird for most of the time. The surrounding habitat consisted of heavily overgrazed pastureland bordering the bottomland woods along the river, which were principally large cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*).

We observe the similar Rufous (*Selasphorus rufus*) and Broad-tailed (*S. platycercus*) hummingbirds, as well as the Calliope, nearly every year at various feeders in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and elsewhere. The Oklahoma hummingbird seemed small compared to these, and the bill appeared to be shorter. It was green-backed, whitish ventrally, and showed conspicuous greenish markings on the sides. But the conclusive diagnostic feature was the color and pattern of its throat: clear white with very obvious reddish-purple streakings that extended out toward the sides of the neck. The only species seen on a regular basis in this part of Oklahoma is the Black-chinned (*Archilochus alexandri*), but in that species the male's gorget shows black, subtended with a narrow band of violet.

The Calliope Hummingbird is a fairly common and regular southbound migrant during summer in the Rocky Mountains. Apparently, it occasionally moves eastward onto the Great Plains in years when food sources are readily available there.

After leaving the the Oklahoma Panhandle, we travelled the following day to southeastern New Mexico. There, in Eddy County, we noted two more Calliope Hummingbirds together with many Rufous Hummingbirds. All were, like the Cimarron County bird, extracting nectar from roadside thistle flowers. A few days later, a male Calliope visited feeders at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in central New Mexico's Rio Grande Valley. According to refuge personnel, it was a first for that area.

John P. Hubbard (1978, Revised check-list of the birds of New Mexico, New Mexico Ornithol. Soc. Pub. No. 6, p. 38) indicates that the Calliope is only occasionally encountered at lower elevations. Closer to the Oklahoma Panhandle is the record of an immature female Calliope collected on the Cimarron River in Morton County, Kansas, on 3 September 1952 (Thompson, M. C., and C. Ely, 1989, Birds in Kansas, Univ. Kansas Mus. Nat. Hist., Vol. 1, p. 362).

The Oklahoma Ornithological Society Bird Records Committee accepted this record as the first for Oklahoma. However, it remains in hypothetical status until a specimen or recognizable photograph has been obtained.—Richard C. and Dorothy J. Rosche, 501 Shelton Street, Chadron, Nebraska 69337, 10 October 1990.

**Unusual food of Rusty Blackbirds.**—A flock of approximately 50 Rusty Blackbirds (*Euphagus carolinensis*) frequented my yard on Hogshooter Creek, a few miles east of Bartlesville in Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma, in November and December 1990. Every morning they would descend from the trees separating the yard and the horse pasture as my daughter Rebecca fed

the horses at first light. The Rustys would eat the scattered grain from the ground and even from the horse troughs when the horses had finished. The entire flock would then move to the ground below a large white oak (*Quercus alba*) in the middle of our gravel driveway, where they fed for about 20 minutes, only to return at least twice before noon.

Wondering why this particular oak tree among all the hundreds of similar oaks nearby was so attractive to the blackbirds, I investigated the area below its crown. There were many acorns there, but that was certainly not unusual. Closer inspection, though, revealed that the acorns had been smashed into small fragments. This apparently made them easy for the blackbirds to eat.

What I did not discover until later was that vehicles were crushing a fresh supply of acorns daily. The Rustys did not leave the horse pasture until my daughter had left for school in a tan and cream colored Bronco and a man checking a nearby oil well pump had driven through in a small white pickup. Both vehicles ran over the acorns every day and the Rustys came to feed soon thereafter. Strangely, the birds paid no attention to my husband in a plain brown van who drove under the tree about forty minutes earlier. Perhaps they were preoccupied with food available in the horse pasture.

This scenario repeated itself throughout November and until 20 December when the horses were moved to another field. By then, all the acorns had fallen and the blackbirds had moved on.

Whether a case for opportunistic feeding or for conditioning to a light-colored vehicle can be made, I do not know. In any event, acorns are an unusual but not unknown food for this species. Bent (1958, Life histories of North American birds, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. No. 211, pp. 288–289) mentioned that in 132 stomachs analyzed, 53% was animal matter, 24.4% grain, 6% weed seed and 16.6% miscellaneous, such as “a small amount of fruit and a little mast.” Ehrlich et al. (1988, The birder's handbook, Simon and Schuster Inc., N. Y., p. 614) listed food of the Rusty Blackbird as consisting primarily of insects, but also seeds, a few spiders, crustaceans, snails, salamanders, fish and a little fruit.—Melinda Droege, Rt. 1, Box 516AA, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74006, 21 January 1991.

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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: \$5 student, \$7.50 regular, \$10 family, \$15 or more sustaining, per year. Life membership \$125. Treasurer, Dr. Jeffrey A. Cox, P.O. Box 27516, Tulsa, OK 74149. Editor, Jack D. Tyler, Department of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505. Associate editors, John S. Shackford, 6008A NW Expressway, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73132, and Melinda Droege, Rt. 1, Box 516AA, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74006. Questions regarding subscription, replacement copies, back issues or payment of dues should be directed to: Darrel W. Pogue, OOS Membership/Circulation Chairman, P.O. Box 65, Ada, Oklahoma 74821-0065. ISSN 0474-0750.