

NESTING OF THE YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD  
IN THE PANHANDLE OF TEXAS

BY KENNETH D. SEYFFERT

The Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) is, according to my records of many years, primarily a transient in the Texas Panhandle, usually encountered sometime between 21 March and 18 June in spring and 3 July to 14 November during fall. Spring migration is largely over by mid-May and in autumn most Yellow-headededs have passed through by late September. Rarely is this bird seen in winter and, with a single exception, it is not known as a breeding species in Texas. Early in this century, Strecker (1912) stated: "May breed in some localities but I have no authentic record of it nesting in the State." Oberholser (1974) cited a possible nesting in the Panhandle: "Thought to have bred in Oldham County (1899)," and three other possible nestings much farther south: "Mason County (1884, 1886) and Culberson County (1939)," but he questioned the validity of all these. The one nesting record he acknowledged was McCauley's (1877), who observed the species "at only a few places," and who discovered but "a single nest . . . in the canyon of the Red River . . ." in what is now Armstrong County during the latter part of May, 1876. Prior to the documentation below, the localities nearest the Texas Panhandle where nesting was known with any regularity were eastern Colorado and southwestern Kansas (Johnsgard, 1979) and at Tucumcari Lake, in Quay County, northeastern New Mexico (Hubbard, 1978), where it apparently has become established (Hubbard, 1983). Sutton (1967) cited one breeding record for Oklahoma: on 19 June 1914, a nest with three eggs was collected near Kenton in Cimarron County, at the far western end of the Panhandle.



Marsh located about 10 miles west of Kress, southwestern Swisher County, Texas, where approximately 50 pairs of Yellow-headed Blackbirds nested in 1990. Photo taken by Nancy Elliott on 19 June, 1990.

On 12 May 1978, Max S. Traweek, Jr., of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, discovered a colony of nesting Yellow-headed Blackbirds on a perennial playa lake near a cattle feedlot located 11 miles west of Hart in southcentral Castro County, Texas. This site is about 60 miles southwest of Amarillo. One nest held three eggs and two others contained two eggs each. He told me of his find, and we returned to the site on 20 May. The playa was surrounded by pastures and croplands and bisected by a dirt road. The western portion of the lake adjoined the feedlot but was devoid of emergent vegetation save for a few willow trees (*Salix* sp.). The eastern section, in addition to roadside willows, supported scattered islands of cattails (*Typha* sp.) and bulrushes (*Scirpus* sp.), some rather extensive in circumference. One cattail island near the road was accessible to wading. Here we found eight Yellow-headed Blackbird nests containing four eggs each, and at least as many empty ones (Williams, 1978). The other clumps of cat tails farther out were not searched, but numerous adult Yellow-headed, mostly females, were seen thereabouts. Also nearby was a flock of approximately 50-75 adult males. Pictures we took of one nest were deposited with the Texas Photo-Record File at Texas A&M University (No. 137).

On 4 June, I returned alone to the nesting site. In the interval, a heavy rain had fallen, raising the water level of the lake considerably. I believe that the nests I found this trip represented a renesting because only three empty nests remained in the cattails that earlier had held 16 nests. In a section of the cattail island previously without nests, I found the following: two nests with one egg each; two with three eggs each; one with four eggs; one with one egg and two young a day or so old; and one with three young with eyes not yet open. There were also three empty nests. The nests were deep and compact cups of coarse plant stems, the ones at the periphery woven rather loosely compared to those in the center. All were secured to the lower stalks of cattails. The eggs were light blue, finely speckled and mottled with brown or reddish-brown, and oval to long-oval in shape. Measuring from their bases, the height of the nests above water level ranged from 8 to 32 inches, averaging 23 inches. Depth of the water was from 3 to 4 feet. My last visit to the colony that year was on 2 July, at which time I saw a dozen or more adult birds feeding their young.

Four years later, on 4 July 1982, Peggy Acord and I visited the playa again. On this late date we observed several juvenile Yellow-headed Blackbirds, as well as numerous adult females that were entering the cattails with food items in their bills, presumably feeding young (Williams, 1982). During my most recent visit to the site (16 May 1987), I estimated 30 Yellow-headed pairs present, the males defending territories and several females nest-building (Williams, 1987).

On 6 June 1979, I examined two other playa lakes in northwestern Castro County where I encountered fairly large numbers of Yellow-headed Blackbirds and where indications of nesting were strong. Deep water, however, prevented a search for nests (Williams, 1979). One of the playas was adjacent to a cattle feedlot and the other was a tailwater lake adjacent to cultivated fields. Both contained many cattail islands. Subsequent to our 1978 find, Fischer et al. (1982) reported Yellow-headed Blackbirds nesting not only in Castro County but also in adjacent Parmer County to the west and Swisher County on the east. More recently, on 19 June 1990, Nancy and Ed Elliott and Carolyn Boyd, while taking part in the Texas Breeding Bird Atlas Project, observed 50 or more nest-building pairs. These birds were at a playa located approximately 10 miles west of Kress in Swisher County (Lasley and Sexton, 1990; see lead photo).

All of the above observations were made in the southwestern part of the Panhandle. On a number of occasions in summer I had found small numbers of Yellow-headed Blackbirds on a perennial playa a half mile east of Spearman, Hansford County, in the northcentral Panhandle. On 7 May 1989, I visited this site and found males singing and displaying on territories. There were also several females in the area, and I observed one with nesting materials in her bill that entered the cattails near a displaying male (Lasley and Sexton, 1989). This site is approximately 30 miles south of Optima Lake in Texas County, Oklahoma, where the species was found nesting on 29 May 1986 for the first time in that state since 1914 (Shackford and Tyler, 1987).

It is not uncommon to see small groups of Yellow-headed Blackbirds in many parts of the Texas Panhandle in summer, particular in late June and early July, leading to speculations that it is a more common nesting species than generally thought. Close observation of most of these birds, however, has indicated that they were early southbound migrants rather than residents. This was also the opinion of Sutton (1967, *op. cit.*) in reference to midsummer sightings in western Oklahoma. Such conclusions are supported by the findings of Royall et al. (1971), who reviewed recovery data on Yellow-headed Blackbirds banded in North and South Dakota. Some recoveries of birds banded earlier in the year were made in the Texas Panhandle and southwestern Oklahoma, primarily between July and September. His findings showed a rapid and direct southward migration from the Dakotas during which these birds travelled at least 70 miles per day. Early migrants, therefore, could be in western Oklahoma and northwest Texas in little more than a week. Numerous times in summer I have observed adult males singing on territory without finding them nesting. For example, I discovered four singing males in a marsh about 50 miles north of Amarillo in northeastern Moore County on 6 June 1978. A thorough search of the marsh, however, revealed neither nests nor female blackbirds.

The question must be raised as to what ecological events have taken place to induce the Yellow-headed Blackbird to take up residence in the Texas Panhandle, a significant extension southward of its recent breeding range. The area has undergone profound changes in land use during this century, particularly in the last 50 years. Most areas that were originally shortgrass prairie are now intensively cultivated, and many cattle feedlots dot the area. Some playas that were once intermittent or ephemeral in nature are now permanent, fed by tailwaters from irrigated croplands or runoff from feedlots. Some new ponds have likewise been created. An estimated 85% of the larger playas in the Panhandle have been modified by man (Bolen et al. 1979).

Orians (1966) set forth the ecological parameters found in a small isolated colony of nesting Yellow-headed Blackbirds that had recently immigrated into an area beyond its known breeding range. The requirements for nesting that he found closely parallel conditions at the Castro County nesting site: (1) a warm and sunny climate; (2) lakes of a relatively constant level with consequent emergent vegetation (principally *Typha* and *Scirpus* spp.) needed for both nesting sites and as primary foraging areas; (3) some surrounding grassland as important supplementary feeding grounds; and (4) water within a certain range of conductivity. This latter factor has not been assessed at the Texas sites. Conductivity was considered "directly correlated with the concentration of dissolved solids in the water, which, in turn, has a strong correlation to the productivity of plankton." This productivity is finally channeled into certain aquatic insects, importantly odonates (damselflies), one of the principal foods of young

blackbirds. Other important prey included coleopterans (beetles), trichopterans (caddisflies), and dipterans (flies). Runoff from heavily fertilized croplands and feedlots would certainly produce higher concentrations than normal of dissolved solids, and it would be reasonable to think that this has occurred at the Texas nesting sites. Merickel and Wangberg (1981) found the insect orders Odonata and Coleoptera among the major taxa present on playa lakes in the southern high plains, with Trichoptera and Diptera less well represented.

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## GENERAL NOTES

**Mourning Dove and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher nests in close proximity.**—The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*), a common summer resident throughout Oklahoma, is known to share nest trees with a variety of other birds including the Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*), Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*), Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*), Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*), Bullock's Oriole (*I. galbula bullockii*), Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*), and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), (Fitch, F.W., 1950, Life history and ecology of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, *Auk* 67:145-167; Sutton, G.M., 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p.333). During the summer of 1992, while conducting a study of nesting success and sexual dimorphism in the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, I observed an exceptional case of nest tree sharing by a pair of Scissor-tails and a pair of Mourning Doves. On 25 June I discovered a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher nest in the early stages of construction in a mesquite tree on the west range of the Fort Sill Military Reservation in Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. No Mourning Dove nest was detected at this time. The nest could not have been more than five days old since this pair (USFWS bands nos. 8051-47807 and 8051-47849) had an earlier nest that was destroyed in a severe storm on 20 June.

At 0745 on 3 July, I revisited this nest, which was now complete and held two eggs. But only 20 cm (8 in.) away, and at almost exactly the same height (2.3 m or 7.5 ft.), was a Mourning Dove nest containing a single egg. By 1550 on the same day, there were three Scissor-tail eggs. At 1710 the next day, there was an additional egg in each nest, and a dove was incubating.

Approximately twelve days later, I began to check the flycatcher nest daily. At this time, the dove nest was empty, perhaps the result of egg predation. I continued to monitor the Scissor-tail nest. Not once did I encounter an incubating female, and the eggs failed to hatch. Whether the failures of both clutches were related to, or independent of, their proximity I do not know.

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**Courtship displays between an Eastern and Western Kingbird in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.**—On the morning of 4 June 1990, while returning from a small mammal survey of the Black Mesa in northwestern Cimarron County, Oklahoma, two companions and I witnessed apparent courtship displays between a Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) and an Eastern Kingbird (*T. tyrannus*). At about 1030, Darrell Pogue, Dave Certain and I spotted the two kingbirds perched next to each other on a barbed wire fence about a mile east of Kenton. Both were darting up into the air together and landing side-by-side, so we stopped the car to study them. We watched as, facing each other, they flew straight up to a height of three to six meters, hovered for several seconds, then rapidly descended back down to the fence together. Their plumage appeared to be slightly fluffed out during this display, and they vocalized excitedly all the while. This behavior was repeated at frequent intervals for the next 15 minutes. A few moments before we left, John Shackford arrived and also saw the two kingbirds displaying.

The kingbirds' behavior closely matched the flying courtship display described by Bent (1942, Bull. U.S. Nat. Mus. 179:13-14; 59) and Smith (1966, Publ. Nuttall Ornithol. Club No. 6, Allen Press, Lawrence, Kansas). Kingbirds are known for their courtship flights, wherein they fly straight up into the air, fluttering, tumbling, vibrating their feathers and vocalizing. They are quick to socially interact with each other, are highly territorial and have a well-deserved reputation of being aggressive towards other species of birds (Smith, *op. cit.*). It is because of this normally aggressive nature of both species that the encounter we witnessed was thought to have been an attempted courtship. Most individuals are paired and in possession of nest sites within a week of their arrival on the breeding ground but young kingbirds may not pair during their first reproductive season (Smith, *op. cit.*). These two individuals were quite likely unpaired and possibly on the breeding ground for the first time. Both species begin to arrive from the south during early April and usually are breeding by May (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, pp. 329-331). Although it was impossible to sex either bird with certainty, we presumed that the Western Kingbird was a male because its courtship flight behavior closely resembled that described by Bent (*op. cit.*) and Smith (*op. cit.*) for that sex. The Eastern Kingbird (presumed female) may have been acting in a defensive manner toward the advances of the other bird. Difficulty in finding an unmated female conspecific could have prompted this Western Kingbird to court perhaps the only available kingbird locally, in this case, an Eastern.

During our sojourn in the Black Mesa country between 31 May and 4 June, we saw large numbers of Western Kingbirds, many of them nesting in the area, particularly in and near Black Mesa State Park 6 miles to the southeast, and in Tesesquite Canyon, 4 miles south of Kenton, but we saw only this one Eastern Kingbird. On a subsequent trip to the area from 22 to 25 May 1992, I could not locate a single Eastern Kingbird. This species approaches the western periphery of its range here, where its preferred mesic habitat is scarce.

Hybridization between intrageneric species of birds is a fairly common occurrence, particularly in the Great Plains (Rising, 1983, *Curr. Ornithol.*, 1:131-157). In the genus *Tyrannus*, Western Kingbirds are known to have hybridized with Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (see Davis and Webster, 1970, *Condor* 72:37-42; Tyler and Parkes, 1992, *Wilson Bull.* 104:178-181) but hybridization between Eastern and Western Kingbirds has yet to be reported.—Steven R. Sheffield, *Department of Zoology, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078, 10 August 1992.*

**Tool use by a White-breasted Nuthatch.**—On 5 May 1992, Donald N. Woodfin, Jimmy D. Woodward and I were searching for Hooded Warblers (*Wilsonia citrina*) believed to be nesting along the South River Road near Keystone Dam in Tulsa County, Oklahoma, 1.2 miles east of Swift Park and 2.2 miles east of the dam. As we hiked along, I spied a White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*) creeping down a dead tree about 20 yards away. As I watched, the bird grasped a loose piece of bark about two inches long in its bill and flew away. It returned about a minute later, still carrying the bark, and landed about 10 feet up on another dead tree trunk about 15 yards from me. Working its way down the trunk until it came to some peeling patches of bark, the nuthatch began to pry off a few loose pieces with its wooden "tool." Once it had dislodged a few fragments, it dropped the "bark tool," explored this newly exposed area, and caught a small invertebrate in its bill. I watched until the bird ended its search

and darted away.

In their comprehensive discussion of the behavior of this species, Stokes and Stokes (1983, A guide to bird behavior, Vol. 2, pp. 131-142, Little, Brown & Co., Boston) made no mention of tool-use. This behavior must therefore be very rare.—Terry L. Mitchell, 1140 S. 101 E. Ave. #3, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74128, 17 December 1992.

**Mountain Bluebird nests in Cimarron County**— At 1720 on 24 April 1986, the senior author observed a pair of Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*) bringing large insects to one or more young birds at a nest in northwestern Cimarron County, about 3 miles north-northwest of Kenton. The nest, about 22 feet up in a cottonwood tree estimated to be 35 feet tall, appeared to have been constructed in an old Northern Flicker's (*Colaptes auratus cafer*) nest hole. At least four other woodpecker cavities had been drilled above this one in a dead limb at the center of the tree. The easternmost extent of the Black Mesa lay just across the road to the west. On both the 24th and 26th, Shackford obtained photographs of the adults at the nest hole. When he returned on 2 May, he could find neither adults nor young in the area.

On 21 May 1991 the junior author and several of his students found another nest, this time in a nestbox in Tesesquite Canyon about 2 miles south of Kenton. The nestbox, attached to a fence post five feet from the ground, was part of an extensive "bluebird trail" established by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation Nongame Program in 1985 and added to by Grigsby and his students in subsequent years. Inside the box they saw young almost ready to fledge. On the following two days, Shackford also observed and photographed adults near this nest and counted at least three young in the box.

The Mountain Bluebird's usual breeding range includes the higher plains and mountains (above 5000 feet) stretching northward and westward from southern New Mexico to Alaska (National Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding, 1983, Vol. 3, p. 50, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y.).

Sutton ([1982], Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman) reported nests or breeding activity in Cimarron County of far western Oklahoma during 1922, 1923, 1971 and 1973. Extralimital nestings have also been recorded in Harmon (1954, 1957), Greer (1957), and Cleveland (1951) counties of western and central Oklahoma. Several of these included nests with eggs or young birds, the most notable being from Cleveland County.—John S. Shackford, 6008-A Northwest Expressway, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73132 and Everett M. Grigsby, 288 Redbud Lane, Tahlequah, Oklahoma 74464.

**Cedar Waxwings in Cherokee County, Oklahoma, during June.**—The Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) is a common winter resident in Oklahoma. Its normal breeding range extends over most of central and northern Canada, with scattered isolated nesting records for at least 12 states (A.O.U. Check-list of North American birds, 6th ed., 1983, p. 582). In the main body of Oklahoma, it has been seen from 19 September to 27 May. In Cimarron County, at the western end of the Panhandle, dates of occurrence range from 10 September to as late as 4 June (Sutton, G.M. [1982], Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman).

There are a handful of breeding records for the state. M.M. Nice (1931, The birds of

Oklahoma, rev. ed., Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv., Vol. 3(1):148) learned from W.E. Lewis of Gate, in Beaver County, that the species nested there in 1921. In Cimarron County, near Kenton, R.C. Tate (1923, *Some birds of the Oklahoma Panhandle, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci.* 3:49) found a nest on 15 June 1914 with four young birds and another with three eggs on 3 June 1920. Only one nest is known east of the Panhandle: on 17 June 1961, V.J. Vacin Jr., discovered two adults at a nest 20 feet up in an elm tree in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County (1961, *Aud. Field Notes* 15:478). Four small young were banded on 25 June and one fledged next day (Sutton, *op. cit.*). A pair of waxwings, probably nesting, was noted in Okmulgee, Okmulgee County, by H. Pitchford and R. Durham on 15 June 1961 (Sutton, *op. cit.*).

On 20 June 1992, I discovered a pair of waxwings along the Illinois River at a place called Combs Bridge, 8 miles north and 2 miles east of Tahlequah in Cherokee County. The time was about 1500, winds were calm, the temperature about 90° F, and skies were partly cloudy. Having just finished a canoe trip from several miles upstream, I was standing on a large gravel shoal in the river. I first noticed a small bird, with rather short tail, fly out over the water from one of the large sycamore trees bordering the west bank. It hovered briefly about 20 feet up, flycatcher-like, then circled back to the west shore and lit in a tree. I suddenly realized that the bird's tail was tipped with a narrow yellow band. The next time it flew out, I noticed that the breast, back and head were brownish, the belly washed with yellow. A companion, Gayle Hagee, also saw a tuft on the bird's head. Other than the much larger Bohemian Waxwing (*B. garrulus*), only the Cedar Waxwing fits this description. Presently, this bird flew across the river and landed on a tall dead willow snag. Moments later, another joined it, perching about three inches away. These two were undoubtedly paired and possibly nesting. After watching several more "flycatching" sorties by the birds over the river, I moved on.

At 1100 the next day, while canoeing down the river about 4 miles northeast of Combs Bridge, I noticed another waxwing. It, too, was "flycatching" over the water.

These late dates more than likely indicate that this pair of waxwings was breeding. The preceding five weeks had brought an unprecedented succession of cold fronts through Oklahoma that had triggered near-record low temperatures and abnormally high precipitation throughout the state. Too, the preceding winter (1991-92) had been one of the mildest on record. Observers should watch for this species during late spring and summer in the future, with an eye to finding nests, the last having been recorded more than 30 years ago.—Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biological Sciences, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 25 June 1992.*

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