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**UNUSUAL OKLAHOMA BREEDING RECORDS  
FROM CIMARRON COUNTY, 2004–2005.**

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*Abstract.*— In May–July 2004 and 2005, SM and JS visited numerous locations in Cimarron County as part of an effort to determine the Oklahoma breeding distributions of Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus*) and Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*). We documented multiple breeding occurrences of species unique to Cimarron County or rare breeders in Oklahoma. Notes from the most significant of those records are provided herein.

*Introduction.*—The Oklahoma Panhandle supports a breeding avifauna that is distinct for its western affinities relative to the remainder of the State. The Oklahoma Breeding Bird Atlas project (Reinking 2004) documented at



**Fig. 1.** A fledgling Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) near Boise City, Oklahoma, 13 June 2005. Photograph by Scott McConnell.

least 29 breeding species confined to the Panhandle from 1997–2001; 19 of those were recorded only in Cimarron County, the westernmost of the Panhandle's 3 counties. Some "state endemic" breeders occur in the Panhandle as an artifact of the region's geography that extends the Oklahoma border > 300 km farther west than that of the rest of the state. Other species are inhabitants of specific habitat features in the region, especially the "shortgrass high-plains" vegetation type described by Hoagland (2004). Cimarron County, in particular, provides unique features for Oklahoma breeding birds, including the state's lowest rainfall totals, its highest point, and the only representation in the state of the "pinyon-juniper mesa" vegetation type (Hoagland 2004).

In May–July 2004 and 2005, SM and JS visited numerous locations in Cimarron County as part of an effort to determine the Oklahoma breeding distributions of Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus*) and Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*). During the course of field work, we documented multiple breeding occurrences for species unique to Cimarron County or otherwise rarely observed as breeders in Oklahoma. Notes from the most significant of these records are provided herein. Taxonomy follows the American Ornithologists' Union (1998).

*Bald Eagle*.—At approximately 0930 h on 30 June 2005, SM observed Western Kingbirds (*Tyrannus verticalis*) and an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) harassing a juvenile Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) along a dry creek bed in western Cimarron County. The eagle attempted several times to land in a cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) grove but quickly moved off to the north. An investigation of the cottonwoods revealed a large stick nest approximately 10 m up in 1 of the trees. The ground beneath the tree was spattered with whitewash, and several skulls of black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*), presumably from a prairie dog town located < 2 km from the nest, were found beneath the nest. At 1030 h an adult Bald Eagle flew over the nest carrying a prey item. After leaving the nest area, SM found a juvenile Bald Eagle (presumably the 1 seen earlier in the day) a few hundred meters to the north, and again found it perched by the nest at 1330 h.

These observations are the first documented nesting record for Bald Eagle in the Oklahoma Panhandle. The previous westernmost breeding location in Oklahoma was in Woodward County (M. Alan Jenkins in litt. 2005). There are no Bald Eagle records in the Oklahoma Breeding Bird Atlas west of Love County (Reinking 2004).

The nest was significant ecologically for its unusual geographic location, and the birds' use of prairie dogs for food. Buehler (2000) stated that Bald Eagles typically nest < 2 km from a large body of water, as they do in eastern Oklahoma (Jenkins 2004). The nearest large body of water, Clayton Lake, was over 50 km to the west. Lake Etling was considerably closer, and Bald Eagles are commonly observed there in winter, but this body of water has been drying up in recent years and was drained completely in April 2005. It is unknown if the presence of Lake Etling before drainage influenced the birds to nest in the area, but C. Boal (pers. comm.) found Bald Eagles nesting in Dalhart County, Texas, in 2004 that were a similar distance

from a large water body and that also preyed predominantly on prairie dogs. These nests indicate that Bald Eagles can nest in nontraditional nesting areas far from lakes and reservoirs and exploit local populations of prairie dogs. Buehler (2000) cited studies where mammals were brought into Bald Eagle nests, but usually as carrion. Jones (1989) found wintering Bald Eagles congregated at prairie dog towns near Boulder, Colorado, but the eagles were stealing prairie dogs from Ferruginous Hawks (*Buteo regalis*), not capturing the mammals themselves. How these prairie-nesting eagles obtain prairie dogs is unknown.

*Virginia Rail*.—At 1035 h on 16 June 2005, SM found a Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) calling in a long, narrow strip of cattails (*Typha* sp.) along the Beaver River. A pair was found there on 17 June and on each subsequent visit through 8 July (10 visits). On 27 June and 5 subsequent dates through 8 July, SM heard as many as 4 juvenile birds simultaneously giving food-begging calls in the area and briefly glimpsed a dusky juvenile following an adult through the cattails on 28 June. An adult was photographed on 2 dates and the juvenile begging calls were recorded on several dates. This is the first confirmed breeding for Virginia Rails in the State since a pair with a brood was found at Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge (Alfalfa County) in 1961, and only the third breeding record in the past 75 years (Sutton 1967; Reinking 2004). Shackford and Tyler (1994) found a pair of Virginia Rails at Lake Etling in western Cimarron County in May 1993, but breeding was not confirmed.

*Short-eared Owl*.—We found a pair of Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus*) in a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) field 5 km NW of Boise City and found and photographed 2 fledglings on 12 June 2005. There were 7 owls in the area as late as 10 July. Another pair with 3 fledglings was found and photographed in a CRP field on 10 July 2005 in east central Cimarron County ~5 km from the Texas County line. These breeding records, along with 1 from Texas County in 2004 (McConnell and Shackford 2005), bring the total reported confirmed breedings in Oklahoma to 8 (Smith 2004). We only made modest efforts to confirm breeding for this species, and greater effort in CRP fields in both Texas and Cimarron counties would likely confirm additional breeding locations.

*Lewis's Woodpecker*.—On 17 May 2005, SM found a pair of Lewis's Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes lewis*) excavating a hole in a partially dead cottonwood 6 km NE of Kenton. The birds were not seen there subsequently, and on 4 July, a pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) was feeding young in a hole ~1 m from the 1 the Lewis's had been working on. On 18 May, at a location 5 km farther east, SM found a pair of Lewis's Woodpeckers at the same nest tree used by a pair in 2004 (McConnell and Shackford 2005) and confirmed breeding there on 4 July. On 7 July, SM found another pair feeding young in a nest in a dead cottonwood in a dry creek bed northeast of Kenton < 100 m south of the Colorado line. These nests appear to represent the first reported breeding for Lewis's Woodpecker in Oklahoma since 1978 (Tyler 1979).

*Cedar Waxwing*.—On 24 June 2005, JS, Berlin Heck, Warren Harden, and Jack Tyler found a Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) visiting a red mulberry (*Morus rubra*) tree in a cottonwood-lined dry creek bed in the north-

western part of Cimarron County. They believed they saw a second bird and searched unsuccessfully for a nest. On 3 July, JS and SM visited the site and JS located the nest approximately 12 m up in a cottonwood tree. A pair of waxwings was bringing in nest material, but no feeding or incubating behavior was observed. This is only the sixth reported breeding for Cedar Waxwings in Oklahoma (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992; Gall 2004).

*Summer Tanager.*—On 20 May 2005, SM observed a Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) with a yellow belly singing in a line of cottonwoods along a dry riverbed 8 km E of Kenton. No female or nest were found in the area, and the spot was not visited again. On 29 May and 19 June, SM found a fully red Summer Tanager singing in thick cottonwoods along a dry riverbed 16 km E of the previous location. Returning to this second location in late morning on 5 July, SM found a pair with the female engaged in building a nest approximately 11 m up in a cottonwood. At the time, the nest was only a light frame consisting of cottonwood down and some small twigs. The male was nearby, singing frequently. Sutton (1967) had an early June record of a female in Cimarron County, but ours is the first confirmed nesting record for this species in the Oklahoma Panhandle. Sutton (1974) thought they bred as far west in the State as Woodward County.

*Spotted Towhee.*—On 11 June 2005, SM found numerous singing Spotted Towhees (*Pipilo maculatus*) south of Kenton, and 1 pair was feeding 2 fledglings in an apparent Gambel's oak (*Quercus gambelii*). This observation is only the second confirmed breeding record for Spotted Towhee in the state (Wiggins et al. 2004), but SM found the species at 21 different locations in 2005. Most of the detections were of singing males, but ? 5 locations involved either pairs or behaviors (e.g., alarm calls, agitation) typically associated with a nest or young nearby. The locations ranged from 11.5 km S of Kenton to 10.3 km NE of Kenton, so it appears that the species is now well established as a breeder in the Kenton area.

*Additional records.*— Other interesting breeding records from 2005 included Black-throated Sparrow (*Amphispiza bilineata*; 1 abandoned nest containing an egg), Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*; 2 nests and 3 flocks with fledglings), Pinyon Jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*; 1 nest with 4 nestlings on 23 June and 3 groups of 12–21 birds that included young of the year), and Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*; males singing in 20 different locations in 2004–2005; breeding confirmed at 2 locations 2005). Western Scrub Jays (*Aphelocoma californica*) were found at 5 locations, and 4 of those included young of the year.

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**Pied-billed Grebe consumed by Blue Catfish at Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge, Oklahoma.**—We report the first observation of an adult Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) consumed by a blue catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*). On 11 November 2004, 20:00 CST, a blue catfish was caught by Bill J. Nabors of Madill, Oklahoma in the Cumberland Pool of Lake Texoma within the Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge. Mr. Nabors was fishing with spinning tackle, 12-pound test line, and whole shad (*Dorosoma* sp.) for

bait. Following capture of the blue catfish, the angler notified Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation personnel, who brought certified scales to the site and determined the fish to weigh 44.45 kg (138.4 cm length, 100.3 cm girth), making it the new state record; the previous state record was 39.46 kg.

Upon completion of weighing and measuring, the fish was transported alive to the Durant State Fish Hatchery and placed in a holding tank set up for this particular fish. During the morning of 12 November 2004, the fish regurgitated what appeared to be a duck. No one witnessed the regurgitation, but no other fish was in the tank. The bird was partially digested but relatively intact; features such as the bill, feet, and general feather coloration were sufficient to allow identification of the species. The remains of the bird were collected by TMP and returned to Southeastern Oklahoma State University where it was identified as an adult Pied-billed Grebe by DRW. Pied-billed Grebes are listed as common in autumn and occasional in winter at Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge (J. Reasor, pers. comm.). Whether the bird was consumed alive by the catfish or scavenged after it was dead could not be determined.

Predation or consumption of adult Pied-billed Grebes by fish has not been documented prior to this observation (Muller and Storer 1999). Fish have been documented as predators of grebe chicks; northern pike (*Esox lucius*) are known predators of young Eared Grebes (*Podiceps nigricollis*; Cullen et al. 1999), Horned Grebes (*Podiceps auritus*; Stedman 2000), and Red-necked Grebes (*Podiceps grisegena*; Stout and Nuechterlein 1999). Largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*) predation on Eared Grebe and Red-necked Grebe chicks also has been documented (Cullen et al. 1999, Stout and Nuechterlein 1999).

While northern lakes provide clear waters that enable sight feeding, southern reservoirs tend to be relatively turbid, making sight feeding difficult for many species, especially benthic species such as catfishes. Blue catfish have been described as opportunistic omnivores (Graham 1999); their diet typically includes aquatic insects, crayfish, fingernail clams, mussels, and fish (Brown and Dendy 1961, Minckley 1962, Perry 1969). In large southern reservoirs such as Lake Texoma, the bulk of the diet of blue catfish is shad (Perry 1969). Pflieger (1997) noted that blue catfish feed on or near the bottom, and in midwater to a lesser extent. Further, it requires a relatively large catfish to consume a bird the size of a grebe. Given these factors, it is not likely that waterfowl make up much of the diet of blue catfish.

Known avian predators of adult Pied-billed Grebes include eagles, falcons, and gulls (Muller and Storer 1999). Other predators of adult Pied-billed Grebes include water moccasin (*Agkistrodon piscivorus*; Leavitt 1957) and American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*; Delany 1986). To the best of the authors' knowledge and a survey of the literature, this is the first documented consumption of an adult Pied-billed Grebe by a blue catfish.

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**Least Grebe at Red Slough, McCurtain County.** — On the afternoon of 8 September 2004, Susan Hooks, Clay Vanhorn, Jason Nolde, and I were touring Red Slough Wildlife Management Area in extreme southeastern McCurtain County, Oklahoma. While standing on the levee of unit #48 looking at shorebirds and waterfowl, a grebe emerged from under the water

about 13 m in front of us. Immediately noticeable, without optics, was its bright yellow eyes, dark coloration, small size, and small, slender bill. I quickly raised my binoculars and confirmed my first impression that it was indeed a Least Grebe (*Tachybaptus dominicus*). The bird remained at this location for the next 3 weeks allowing many birders to see and photograph it. During this time, it socialized with a family group of 5 Pied-billed Grebes (*Podilymbus podiceps*). It was seen on several occasions cooperating with the Pied-billed Grebes to herd and corral minnows to feed on. Occasionally, it was found alone or with 1 of the juvenile Pied-billed Grebes. On a couple of occasions, it was heard calling. The bird was last seen at Red Slough on 29 September 2004. This sighting was subsequently accepted by the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee as Oklahoma's first record of Least Grebe (Oklahoma Bird Records Committee, 2004. Date guide to the occurrences of birds in Oklahoma. Fourth Edition. Oklahoma Ornithological Society, Tulsa, Oklahoma).

In Texas, Least Grebes are expanding their range slowly northward, nesting regularly at San Antonio and have also nested in the Austin area. They also are expanding their range up the Gulf Coast on coastal prairies to the Louisiana border with many nesting records. Recent extralimital records include 1 at Burnet, Burnet County, Texas, 2 January 1998; 1 in Washington County, Texas, 14 June — 8 July 2000; and a nesting pair in Freestone County, Texas, 1 June 2004 (M. Lockwood, pers. comm.). This last site is about 256 km from Red Slough. Louisiana has 1 old record from Baton Rouge of a bird collected on 14 December 1947 (V. Remsen, pers. comm.).

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