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## SANDHILL CRANES WINTERING IN JACKSON COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY JAMES C. LEWIS

**T**HE SANDHILL CRANE (*Grus canadensis*) winters regularly, though in variable numbers, in Jackson County, southwestern Oklahoma, and in adjacent parts of Wilbarger County, Texas. This important fact has only recently come to light. Nice, in her *Birds of Oklahoma* (1931) listed two races of *G. canadensis*



### SANDHILL CRANES MIGRATING SOUTHWARD

Watercolor drawing by George Miksch Sutton based on observations in the Black Mesa country of Cimarron County, Oklahoma, in the fall of 1932. Reproduced through the courtesy of the owner, James L. Norman, of Muskogee, Oklahoma.

(*tabida* and nominate *canadensis*), calling each a "transient," and mentioning (fide W. E. Lewis) that the larger of the two, *tabida*, "sometimes" overwintered near Gate, Beaver County, at the eastern end of the Panhandle, when the weather was "mild" (p. 48). Sutton, in *Oklahoma Birds* (1967), stated that Sandhill Cranes overwinter "occasionally" (p. 150), and listed January and February dates (given also in Nice) on which J. C. Camp saw the species in Washita County, southwestern Oklahoma, in 1911 (p. 153). Careful measurement of specimens collected by me makes it clear that three races—*tabida*, *rowani*, and nominate *canadensis*—pass through western Oklahoma in migration. Whether all three of these overwinter regularly in southwestern Oklahoma remains to be determined.

Sandhill Cranes inhabited parts of Jackson County, Oklahoma, and of Wilbarger County, Texas, throughout the severe winter of 1968-69. From discussions that I had with Wesley Webb, Ranger of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, with Charles Boynton, Ranger of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and with several local ranchers, I became convinced that some Sandhill Cranes overwinter regularly in this part of the Southern Great Plains. In the winter of 1968-69 the cranes roosted in the shallow waters of the Prairie Dog Town Fork and Salt Fork of the Red River and along Gypsum Creek. I found that there were at least eight roosts either in or adjacent to Jackson County, Oklahoma. Several of the larger roosts were in such isolated areas that either a 4-wheel-drive vehicle or a several-mile walk was required in reaching them. One roost had been used every winter since 1941—the year in which the present landowner had purchased the property—and other roosts appeared to have had an equally long history of use. Two roosts that were first used in the winter of 1965-66 had been used each winter since that time.

The typical daily pattern of wintering cranes started with flight at daybreak from the roost to the feeding fields. Some cranes left the roosts singly, but most of them left in groups of up to several hundred birds during a 30- to 60-minute period. They flew directly to the feeding fields, which were from 0.5 to 12 miles from the roosts. Wheat, shocked or "combined" maize, and pastureland in which hybrid maize x Sudan-grass had been planted were the most commonly used feeding areas. Crop depredation was not a problem during the winter of 1968-69, but in earlier years a few ranchers had complained about crane-damage to sprouting wheat and shocked maize.

Feeding activity declined by mid-morning, when some birds flew to nearby ponds or streams to drink. Others returned to the roosts to drink and loaf there. During the middle of the day large flocks occasionally took part in high spiraling flights for up to 30 minutes before returning to the feeding areas. The afternoon feeding period ended with a flight to the roost after sunset.

Oklahoma's first crane hunting season in modern times opened on 14 December

1968 and continued into mid-January. Most of the hunting pressure occurred the first few days and very few hunters participated. The known harvest for the season was eight cranes in Jackson County, Oklahoma, and 12 cranes in Wilbarger County, Texas—a harvest believed by local game rangers and by me to constitute about 80 to 90 per cent of the actual kill within the circumscribed area the cranes inhabited. Removal of this small number represented about 1 per cent (or less) of the total number of cranes present on 14 December.

Some population decline was evident as winter advanced. One roost was deserted in January and three others in February. One roost that remained active throughout the winter contained 400 cranes on 1 December; 250 on 26 December; 55 on 18 January; and six to 12 birds in March. Periodic counts gave some idea of the decline in wintering birds (Table I), but these were not

Table I  
Daily Counts of Sandhill Cranes in Jackson County, Oklahoma,  
20 November 1968 to 8 March 1969

Month	Day	Number of Cranes	Month	Day	Number of Cranes
November	20	2,600+	December	29	559
	30	250	January	2	476
December	1	1,393		3	200
	2	416		4	300
	13	250		17	150
	14	300		18	865
	15	777	February	15	13
	16	546		16	74
	26	650	March	1	313
	27	266		2	200
	28	439		8	385

complete counts. A day's census usually consisted of counting birds as they left or returned to a roost and of checking the numbers of birds in known feeding fields. November and early December counts would certainly have been higher had the location of some of the roosts and feeding areas been known to me at that time.

In my opinion the population decline was due largely to the moving farther south of some cranes as food became scarce and weather more severe along the Red River. Migration northward started at winter's end. No cranes were seen north of Jackson County, Oklahoma, until late February 1969. On 27 February several thousand cranes were seen migrating northward over Ellis County, Oklahoma. Cranes were not seen on the ground at the Washita National Wildlife Refuge, in Custer County, Oklahoma, until 8 March.

The behavior of the cranes in southwestern Oklahoma reflected the fact

that the winter of 1968-69 was more severe than that of 1967-68. On 28 January 1968, 21 cranes were still present on the Washita refuge; in the winter of 1968-69, on the other hand, the last sizeable group (34 birds) was seen at that refuge on 23 November. Two birds seen on 2 December were the last seen at that refuge until late February, when migrating birds began passing over.

This variation from year to year in the length of time Sandhill Cranes spend in southwestern Oklahoma in winter seems to be fairly typical. According to census data supplied through the courtesy of Refuge Manager Lee Marlett, of the U. S. Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife, cranes were still present on the Washita refuge in January in 1963-64, 1964-65, and 1966-67. In 1965-66, a severe winter, cranes were last seen on that refuge in late November.

OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE WILDLIFE RESEARCH UNIT, OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY, STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA 74074, 27 APRIL 1969.

## EXTRALIMITAL SAGE THRASHER RECORDS FOR OKLAHOMA

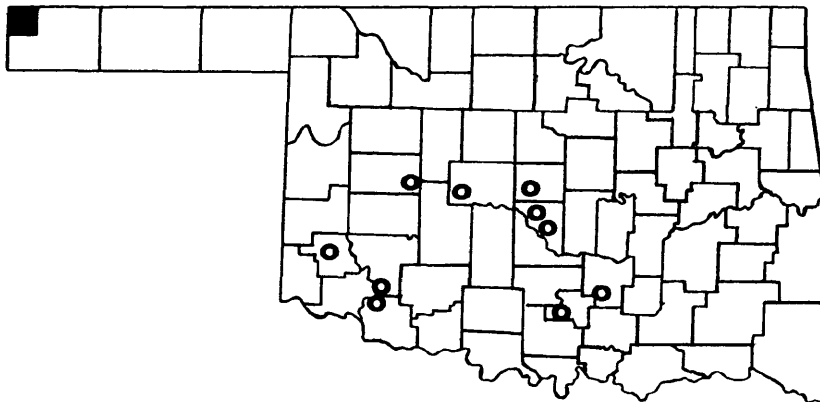
BY WILLIAM A. CARTER AND JACK D. TYLER

**I**N THE BLACK MESA country of northwestern Cimarron County, Oklahoma, the Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*) is a regular transient in both spring and fall; in early fall it is sometimes abundant there. In the "A-11 pasture" southwest of Boise City, Cimarron County, R. C. Tate found a nest (4 eggs) on 13 June 1920; on that date he saw also three adult birds (Tate, 1923, *Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci.*, 3: 49; Nice, 1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, p. 141). Oddly enough, the species has never been reported from Texas County or Beaver County. In the main body of the state it has been noted infrequently in fall and winter, records for the following counties having been considered valid: Greer 1, Custer 1, Canadian 1, Oklahoma 2, Cleveland 3, Murray 2; at least one specimen has been taken in each of these counties except Oklahoma (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, p. 426).

Three specimens have been taken in and one sighting reported from Oklahoma east of the Black Mesa country since the publication of *Oklahoma Birds*. On 11 March 1967, in mesquite and buffalo grass pastureland 4½ miles west and ½ mile north of Snyder, in Kiowa County, J. D. Tyler took a male; this specimen (UOMZ 6081) is in the bird collection at the University of Oklahoma. On 4 October 1968, among tall grass along a fence about 15 miles south and 7 miles west of Ada, in Pontotoc County, W. A. Carter and Larry P. Mays took a male with incompletely ossified skull; the stomach contained one field cricket (*Gryllus* sp.); the skin (EC-B-245) is in the biological collections at East Central State College in Ada, Oklahoma. On 28 November 1968, near a granite knoll in sand sage grassland along the North Fork of the Red River 8½ miles north and 2½ miles east of Tipton, in Tillman County, J. D. Tyler took a male with in-

completely ossified skull; the skin (JDT 49) is in the bird collection at Cameron State College in Lawton, Oklahoma. On 27 October 1968, J. G. Newell saw a Sage Thrasher in Oklahoma County near Oklahoma City (1969, *Audubon Field Notes*, 23: 76).

As the accompanying map shows, the easternmost Oklahoma records for *Oreoscoptes montanus* are from Oklahoma, Cleveland, Pontotoc, and Murray counties, the northernmost (for the main body of the state) from Custer, Canadian,



#### EXTRALIMITAL SAGE THRASHER RECORDS IN OKLAHOMA

*The species migrates regularly through and winters irregularly in the Black Mesa country of northwestern Cimarron County, the part shown in solid black. Circles designate extralimital records.*

and Oklahoma counties. One of these northernmost records was for midwinter—a male (UOMZ 2883) taken on 6 January 1957 in a canyon near Niles, in Canadian County, by W. E. Southern; another was of a female (UOMZ 2275) taken on 27 February 1955 near Weatherford, in Custer County, by R. D. Gibson. One of the Oklahoma County records is of a bird seen repeatedly at a feeder and bird-bath in a residential part of Oklahoma City from 22 to 31 October 1956 by R. H. Furman and Mary Frances Furman. For the main body of the state there are two 1955 records; five 1956 records (the above-mentioned 22-31 October sightings may properly be considered one record); two 1957 records; one 1967 record; and three 1968 records. These extralimital records fall between 4 October and 11 March, indicating sporadic fall and winter occurrence. The species has been seen several times in winter in the Black Mesa country, but it is not common there at that season.

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## GENERAL NOTES

**Additional notes on food and fat of Roadrunners in winter.**—In a recent paper I pondered the possibility that during periods of severe winter weather along the northern edge of its range the Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*) might live on stored fat (Geluso, 1969, *Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc.*, 2: 5-6). The fact that some Roadrunners taken in Oklahoma in midwinter have—according to comments on labels of specimens housed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range—been very fat supports this idea. Two female Roadrunners taken in the Black Mesa country of northwestern Oklahoma and northeastern New Mexico in late February of 1969 were not at all fat, however (see Table I).

Table I  
Weight and Fat-Weight of Roadrunners taken in Black Mesa Country in Late February

UOMZ No.	Sex	Date Collected	Weight (grams)	Fat-Weight (grams)
6504	F.	25 February 1969	319.4	3.6 (subcutaneous and lump)
6505	F.	26 February 1969	300.1	9.2 (subcutaneous and lump)

The first of these specimens was taken in Union County, northeastern New Mexico—5.7 mi. east and 31.4 mi. north of the village of Mt. Dora, the other in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 5.3 mi. east and 1.8 mi. north of the village of Wheelless. The weather had been mild for that country, there having been no snow on the ground in either area on 25 and 26 February or during the week preceding 25 February. In each specimen the ovary was slightly enlarged, a condition that may well have been correlated with clemency of weather.

The food-packed stomach (weight 38.1 grams) of the New Mexico specimen contained the following: 497 Darkling Beetles (Tenebrionidae), most of them about 6 mm. long; 2 Lady Beetles (Coccinellidae); 5 Milkweed Bugs (Lygaeidae); 5 fairly large True Grasshoppers (Locustidae), 3 Assassin Flies (Asilidae); and 4 butterfly larvae (Lepidoptera). The stomach (weight 23.5 grams) of the Oklahoma specimen contained 49 Darkling Beetles, 7 Snout Beetles (Curculionidae), 3 True Grasshoppers, 2 Milkweed Bugs, 1 beetle larva (Coleoptera), 1 butterfly larva, 1 Wolf Spider (Lycosidae), and 1 Jumping Spider (Salticidae). I did not find the slightest trace of a vertebrate in either stomach. Darkling Beetles may congregate in considerable numbers in sheltered places in winter, thus making themselves available in quantity to any Roadrunner that happens to find them. The fact that two Roadrunners taken about 50 miles apart should each have consumed a preponderance of Darkling Beetles during the same 48-hour period is interesting in itself. Further data pertaining to the winter survival of this remarkable terrestrial cuckoo at the northern edge of its range should be obtained. I wish to thank my friend David J. Shetlar for assisting me in identifying the above-listed invertebrates.—Kenneth N. Geluso, *Department of Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87106, 6 March 1969.*

**Saw-whet Owl in Blaine County, Oklahoma.**—At about 22:00 in the evening on 11 November 1969, in thinly wooded country along State Highway 281

about 2 miles south of Greenfield, Blaine County, central Oklahoma, a car driven by my son-in-law, Arthur D. Linville of Chickasha, Oklahoma, struck and killed a Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*). Mr. Linville did not stop to pick up the dead bird, but at a filling station close by he found the carcass clinging to the front of his car. Believing it to be a "baby owl," he decided to show it to his wife, who called me immediately, for she knew she had never seen an owl of that sort.

George M. Sutton, who prepared the specimen (UOMZ 6612), found it to be a male. It was in excellent condition, though not very fat (weight 77.6 grams; stomach empty). Its wingspread was 449 mm. (about 19¼ in.). Each testis measured about 1.5 x 2.5 mm. The irides were bright yellow, not orange.

This is the first completely acceptable Saw-whet Owl record for the main body of the state. The species has been taken twice before in Oklahoma, on both occasions in Texas County in the Panhandle. A female specimen "collected" [probably found dead] by Eleanor Henderson in or near the town of Eva on 29 November 1933, was "in too poor condition to skin," but its skeleton was preserved (Long, 1934, *Auk*, 51: 236-37). A female (UOMZ 2850) collected 29 January 1957 by R. H. Davy on the school grounds in the heart of the city of Guymon was preserved as a skin (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, p. 265). According to Dr. Sutton the Blaine County specimen represents the nominate race; its wing measures 136 mm. (140 with primaries pressed flat), its tail 72.—Myra Lamb, *College of Liberal Arts, Chickasha, Oklahoma 73018*, 4 December 1969.

**Early spring and late fall Oklahoma records for the Cassin's Kingbird.**—According to my book *Oklahoma Birds* (1967, p. 332), the earliest spring date for the Cassin's Kingbird (*Tyrannus vociferans*) in Oklahoma is 17 April. This is a mistake that I cannot explain; among the data on file at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range I find nothing indicating that the species has ever been seen or taken in Oklahoma as early as mid-April. The earliest spring record on hand at the time I gave my manuscript final inspection was of a bird seen 27 April 1953 at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County by John B. Van den Akker (Baumgartner, 1953, *Audubon Field Notes*, 7: 281)—incidentally the easternmost sighting of *Tyrannus vociferans* for the state. That the species may arrive earlier than 27 April was proved on 25 April 1969, when Charles W. Comer took a male specimen (UOMZ 6452) along the Cimarron River 8 miles east of Kenton, Cimarron County; but I doubt that the species ever returns to its breeding ground near Kenton as early as 17 April, for spring is usually late in that part of Oklahoma.

On 14 September 1959 I saw and collected an adult male Cassin's Kingbird (UOMZ 3680) near Kenton. The bird was by itself on a slope at the foot of a mesa about 3 miles southeast of town. I regarded 14 September as a late date for the species when my book went to press. But on 1 October 1967 John S. Weske saw a Cassin's Kingbird with an Eastern Kingbird (*T. tyrannus*) and a Say's Phoebe (*Sayornis saya*) in pastureland along Texakeet Creek southeast of Kenton; and on 5 October 1968 several of my students and I saw a Cassin's Kingbird in a partly dead big cottonwood at the site of the Bernie North ranch-house 13 miles north of Boise City, Cimarron

County. The stay of the Cassin's Kingbird in Oklahoma extends, then, from 25 April to 5 October rather than "from April 17 to September 14."—George M. Sutton, *Stovall Museum of Science and History, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 4 May 1969.*

**Vermilion Flycatcher in Canadian County, Oklahoma.**—On the morning of 30 March 1969 (north wind 10-20 mph; air temperature 42° F.) my wife and I observed a fully adult male Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) for about 15 minutes at the edge of a six-acre flooded area along the North Canadian River 2 miles north of Calumet, Canadian County, central Oklahoma. The bird was feeding on insects that it snapped principally from the water's surface. Between sallies it perched on twigs that protruded from the water, which appeared, from our position on a road about 30 yards away, to be two or three feet deep. We saw briefly another bird that might have been the bright male's mate, but we did not see this dull-colored bird at all clearly.

The Vermilion Flycatcher is among the several southwestern bird species that appear to be establishing themselves in Oklahoma; it has not, so far as I know, been reported heretofore from Canadian County (see Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, pp. xxxviii, 350).—Brad Carlton, 5949 West 27th Street, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73127, 15 July 1969.

**Recovery in Saskatchewan of a Song Sparrow banded in Oklahoma.**—Recently I received word from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service that a Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) banded by me near Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, on 13 November 1966 had been killed by a house cat on 20 July 1967 near the town of Hudson Bay (not to be confused with the body of water of the same name) in east-central Saskatchewan. This recovery in the breeding season makes clear that at least part of the Oklahoma wintering population migrates about 1200 miles northward to a nesting area in Canada—information that is in complete accord with statements in the *AOU Check-list of North American Birds* (1957) to the effect that in the longitude of Oklahoma the Song Sparrow breeds from northeastern Kansas (p. 630) and northern Nebraska (p. 632) northward to northern Saskatchewan (p. 631) and northern Manitoba (p. 632). The race that breeds within these latitudinal limits and directly north of Oklahoma is *M. m. juddi* (pp. 631-632).

Worth noting is the fact that the race *M. m. euphonia*, which breeds widely in the eastern United States and which winters to some extent in Oklahoma, breeds southwestward to "southwestern Missouri (Jasper County) and northwestern and north-central Arkansas" (p. 631). The proximity of these areas to Oklahoma suggests that *Melospiza melodia* may one day be found nesting in the northeastern corner of Oklahoma. One specimen in the series of 80-some Song Sparrows housed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range is in virtually complete *juvenal* feather. This bird, a female taken on 13 September 1959 by J. D. Ligon along the Cimarron River 13 mi. north of Boise City, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, has been identified by K. C. Parkes of the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh as "nearest *juddi*." *M. m. juddi* and *M. m. montana* both winter regularly in Cimarron County (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, pp. 637-38).—John S. Weske, *Stovall Museum of Science and History, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 12 March 1969.*