

Bulletin of the

# OKLAHOMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Vol. IV

MARCH, 1971

No. 1

## THE VERDIN IN NORTHWESTERN TEXAS

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ON 22 DECEMBER 1965, during the Christmas Count of the Texas Panhandle Audubon Society in Palo Duro Canyon State Park in Randall County, northwestern Texas, Carroll D. Littlefield saw an adult Verdin (*Auriparus flaviceps*) about 200 yards south-southeast of the riding stable (1966, Audubon Field Notes, 20: 313). This sighting was, so far as I know, the first of the Verdin for Palo Duro Canyon, if not for the whole of the Texas Panhandle.



Two Verdin nests in little-leaf sumac. Photographed on 5 July 1970 in Palo Duro Canyon State Park, Randall County, Texas, by Kenneth D. Seyffert. The upper nest probably was used in 1970, the lower in a previous year.

On 9 January 1966, Peggy Acord, George Waddill, Esther Waddill, Kenneth Whipple, and Kathryn Whipple discovered a Verdin's winter roosting nest a few yards back of the so-called Sad Monkey railroad station in the same general area. The nest was about 6 feet up in the topmost branch of a jeube bush (*Zizyphus obtusifolia*). A small bird seen by the five just-named persons in the immediate vicinity on that date was not positively identified, but Leo A. Galloway and I, visiting the nest separately on 10 and 15 January, respectively, each clearly saw a Verdin as it approached and entered the nest shortly before nightfall.

On 5 September 1966, I saw an adult Verdin a mile south of the Sad Monkey depot at a spot about 300 yards downstream from the first of five road-crossings of the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River. On 21 January 1967, I saw two Verdins about 500 yards west of the Sad Monkey depot.

On 26 March 1967, about 150 yards east of the Sad Monkey depot, I happened upon a Verdin busily constructing a nest about 8 feet up in the top of a little-leaf sumac (*Rhus microphylla*) growing on a sloping bank above the floodplain of the Prairie Dog Town Fork. Presently I perceived that a second Verdin was participating in the nest building. Throughout April and May, Leo Galloway and I kept this nest under observation. On 21 May I put my finger inside it, feeling three young, a count confirmed on 5 June, when I observed two adult Verdins and three fledglings across the stream not far east of the nest site. On 18 June I saw a young bird near the nest site.

On 28 June 1970, I found another Verdin's nest about 300 yards north of the one just discussed. This latter nest was about 9½ feet up in the outermost branch of a little-leaf sumac growing in an "island" of small mesquites (*Prosopis juliflora*) and one-seed junipers (*Juniperus monosperma*). The nest was 6 inches long and 3¾ inches in diameter; although unoccupied, it appeared to be of recent construction as it was in good condition and well lined with feathers. In the same bush was another nest, this one of a previous year's construction, weathered and hollowed out inside. On 6 September 1970 I saw three Verdins within a quarter mile of these two nests. All three appeared to be in juvenal plumage; at any rate I could see neither yellow on their heads nor rust on their wings.

The nesting of the Verdin in Palo Duro Canyon furnishes evidence of what appears to be a significant extension of range. The AOU Check-list of North American birds (1957: 394) states that the subspecies *Auriparus flaviceps ornatus* is resident "from central and southeastern Arizona . . . , southern New Mexico (San Antonio, Deming, Carlsbad) and southwestern and south-central Texas (Monahans, Kerrville, Seguin, Corpus Christi, Harlingen) [southward] to north-eastern Sonora (Arispe) and Tamaulipas (San Fernando)." Of the localities

named here, the closest to Palo Duro Canyon are Carlsbad, New Mexico, and Monahans, Texas, each of these being about 250 miles from the canyon. The Verdin is not listed for Oklahoma by Sutton (1967, Oklahoma Birds) or for Colorado by Bailey and Niedrach (1965, Birds of Colorado). In his "New Mexico birds and where to find them," Ligon (1961: 210) states that the range of *Auriparus flaviceps* "covers the southern section of the state, extending north to Silver City, Socorro, Tularosa, and Dexter." Dexter is a little closer than Carlsbad to Palo Duro Canyon.

I have seen the Verdin myself in Lubbock County, Texas (on 30 December 1966 Carroll Littlefield and I saw two; on 29 December 1968 I saw one), in an area about 150 miles north of Monahans and 125 miles south of Palo Duro Canyon. According to M. Kent Rylander (personal letter of 28 May 1968), the species has not been found nesting in Lubbock County. The field check-list of birds of that county summarizes the status of the Verdin as "uncommon" in winter and "rare" in summer. Leo Galloway informs me that he saw a Verdin in Stonewall County, Texas, 9 miles east of the town of Jayton, on 10 May 1970 (predominant vegetation in area: mesquite). Stonewall County is about 100 miles south of the southwestern corner of the main body of Oklahoma.

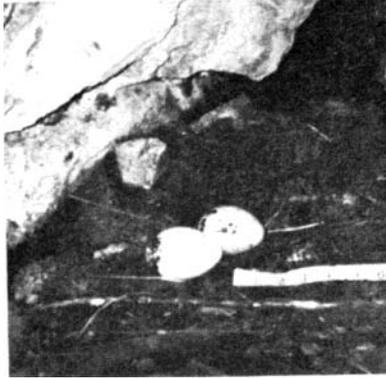
Recent Texas sightings of the Verdin by John S. Weske are considerably closer to Oklahoma than others on record. On 5 December 1967 he saw (and collected) a female "in a smilax tangle in low but fairly dense hackberry-elm-cottonwood woodland" along Beaver Creek, 10½ miles south and 2½ miles east of Harrold, Wilbarger County (about 20 miles south of the Oklahoma state line). On the same date he recorded two more Verdins—one heard calling (but not seen) in a dense smilax tangle along Beaver Creek 14 miles south-southeast of Vernon, Wilbarger County (about 16 miles south of Oklahoma) and later in the day, one seen among big mesquite trees (in a pasture in which scattered small live-oaks also grew) 2½ miles west and ¾ of a mile south of Elbert, Throckmorton County (about 65 miles south of Oklahoma). On 27 February 1968 he saw a Verdin along the Little Wichita River 4 miles north of Archer City, Archer County (about 32 miles south of the Oklahoma state line).

Observers should be on the alert for the Verdin in all southwestern Oklahoma counties that border Texas.

2709 S. FAIRFIELD ST., AMARILLO, TEXAS 79103, 25 OCTOBER 1970.

### GENERAL NOTES

**Early nesting of Black Vulture in Oklahoma.**—On 22 March 1970 a boy and his sister saw a Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) enter a small opening in the rock at the top of a rugged 30-foot limestone outcropping in grassland 5 miles east of Connerville, Johnston County, south-central Oklahoma. Investigating, the children discovered the incubating bird, which flushed



from a much larger opening about 10 feet below the top of the outcropping. The two eggs were about 3 feet down from the hole the vulture had entered. The boy promptly shot the bird, but saved the two eggs, which I later found to be quite fresh.

Jon V. Cecil and I visited the cave on 27 March. We had no difficulty finding it, for the decomposing carcass of the vulture was directly below the lower entrance. The "nest" itself had been at the edge of a rock shelf about 5 feet back from this lower entrance to the shallow cave (see photo).

Droppings, scratch marks, and worn or polished places on the rock indicated that the vultures had used the small upper entrance to the cave many times (perhaps all the time) in reaching their eggs. According to Bent (1937, Life histories of North American birds of prey, Part 1, U. S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 167, p. 30), the Black Vulture commonly chooses "hollow stumps, access to which is only from the top" for nesting. If the Johnston County vultures used the small upper entrance rather than the main mouth of the cave, their comings and goings probably were not very noticeable to human beings and other possible predators. The birds may, of course, have used both the upper and lower entrances to the cave and nest site.

The earliest dates heretofore on record for the nesting of the Black Vulture in Oklahoma are 15 April 1956, when W. R. Heard found two eggs in Wagoner County (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 92), and 23 April 1927, when Margaret M. Nice found two "downy fawn-colored young" in a "cleft of rocks" in the Arbuckle Mountains in Murray County (Nice, 1931, Birds of Oklahoma, p. 67; Sutton, *op. cit.*).—Larry P. Mays, *Department of Biology, East Central State College, Ada, Oklahoma 74820, 8 May 1970.*

**Spring arrival date for Sora Rail in Oklahoma.**—According to Margaret M. Nice (1931, Birds of Oklahoma, p. 85), who considered the Sora Rail (*Porzana carolina*) a "rare summer resident" in Oklahoma, the earliest dates for the species' arrival in the state were 16 April 1915 (Tulsa County, A. J. B. Kirk), 19 April 1926 (Cleveland County, Nice), and 20 April 1927 (Cleveland County, Nice). Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 162), who called *Porzana carolina* a "transient," stated that spring migration takes place from 11 April to 20 May. That the Sora may arrive from the south considerably earlier than 11 April is obvious from (1) the sighting of a single bird by J. G. Newell near Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma, on 6 April 1963; (2) repeated sightings of one to five birds by Newell *et al.* in the same general area between 9 April and 17 May 1967; (3) the sighting by R. Benjamin Anderson of a single bird at a small lake near Cushing, Payne County, north-central Oklahoma, on 10 April 1967; and (4) the finding of a dead specimen in Mannford, Creek County, northeastern Oklahoma, on 2 April 1970.

The Mannford specimen was found by three fifth-grade schoolboys, Dana Brown, Gregory Ward, and David Swezey, in the back yard of the Brown residence not far from the school building in which I teach. The rather badly decomposed specimen, which the boys brought to me for identification, probably had been dead two or three days. The short, chickenlike, yellow bill, long, slender toes, thin body, and dark plumage of the face, throat, and foreneck were unmistakable. The many electric lights that were on all night near the schoolgrounds may have attracted and blinded the flying bird in such a way as to cause it to strike a wire. I made no attempt to preserve the specimen.

The northward migration of *Porzana carolina* across Oklahoma evidently spans the period between the first of April, or last of March, and late May. Further careful observation in marshy places in June, July, and August may lead to discovery that the Sora breeds in many parts of the state. According to Sutton (*op. cit.*) there are midsummer records (26 May to 6 August) for Tulsa, Bryan, Cleveland, Oklahoma, and Alfalfa counties. Two specimens obtained by George B. Wint in Canadian County, central Oklahoma—a male in first winter feather (UOMZ 3156) collected at Concho on 23 August 1957, and an adult female in complete breeding feather (UOMZ 2817) found dead on the State Game Farm near El Reno on 28 August 1956—may represent separate breeding populations. An adult bird found dead by W. Marvin Davis on 30 May 1968 in a road near water-filled irrigation ditches 4 miles southwest of Tipton, Tillman County, southwestern Oklahoma, might have been a breeding bird.—Zella Moorman, P.O. Box 72, Mannford, Oklahoma 74004, 3 July 1970.

**Ring-billed Gull steals fish from coot.**—The thieving habits of the larger gulls are well known. Among North American gulls, the Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) is probably the most publicized for its thievery, for wherever people watch Brown Pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) diving for fish along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico they are likely to see Laughing Gulls waiting for the pelicans to surface with prey (Bent, 1921, "Life histories of North American gulls and terns," U. S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 113, p. 160). The Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*), a larger species than the Laughing Gull, is not so well known for its thieving, though Bent (*op. cit.*, p. 137) has this to say of it: "I have seen ring-billed gulls hovering over a flock of feeding red-breasted mergansers [*Mergus serrator*] and darting down at them as they rose to the surface. They were apparently trying to rob them of or make them drop some of the fish they had caught."

On the afternoon of 24 January 1970 (sky clear, slight wind, air temperature 58° F.) my wife (Mary Ann), mother-in-law (Mrs. Anna Sparrow), and I were watching waterbirds from a car along the west side of Lake Thunderbird, about 13 miles east of Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma. The preceding three weeks had been exceedingly wintry, so much of the lake was frozen over. While observing the many Ring-billed Gulls that were flying about over the water and walking on the ice, we noticed an American Coot (*Fulica americana*) swimming not far from shore along the edge of the ice. Since the coot was a "new bird" for Mrs. Sparrow, we made a point of watching it as it climbed onto the ice and made its way to

a hole that had remained open as a result of the blowing back and forth of a partly submerged branch. Standing at the edge of the hole, the coot managed to pull a dead fish about five inches long—possibly a gizzard shad (*Dorosoma cepedianum*), for mortality in that species is known to be high during severe winter weather—from the water onto the ice. Suddenly a Ring-billed Gull flew at the coot, frightening it. The coot ducked and moved a short way off as the gull, swooping swiftly, picked the fish from the ice, flew to open water in the middle of the lake, alighted, and ate the fish.—Warren D. Harden, 1609 Rosemont Drive, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 9 March 1970.

**Late fledging of Barn Owl in northeastern Oklahoma.**—The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) has nested regularly within the city limits of Muskogee, Muskogee County, northeastern Oklahoma, for many years. At the Fite Clinic on North Fourteenth Street, two blocks from the house in which my family and I live, Barn Owls nested under the eave of the two-story building from about 1950 to 1969. A considerable pile of bones, fur, and pellets accumulated on the ground under the hole through which the owls came and went. Most of the bones were obviously those of small mammals. The hole was closed in 1969, when the building was repaired.

Barn Owls have nested for many years also in the Severs Hotel, an old building at the corner of Fourth and Wall Streets in downtown Muskogee. The nest site has been somewhere in the space between the ceiling of the top (tenth) floor and the roof. When plaster fell from the ceiling, 24-inch holes opened along the eaves, and through these holes the owls have come and gone. Everyone has known about the birds. Occasionally one of the adult or young birds has been found in the hotel or in the Federal Building across the street and has been written up in the newspaper. At monthly evening meetings of the Session of the First Presbyterian Church—a large building just west of the Severs Hotel parking lot—I have heard Barn Owl cries without fail for the past three years—an interesting fact in itself for it so clearly proves that the owls, whether nesting or not, have been living all year in the hotel. How many owls there have been; whether they have been both adult and young; and whether the owls I heard were the very ones that have bred and been reared at the Severs Hotel nest site, no one can say, but the owls have certainly been there.

On 9 December 1969 Mrs. Don Shartle found a dead Barn Owl lying in the street near the church. Knowing of my interest in birds, she brought the specimen to me. I put it in deep-freeze, for I knew that eventually its skin or skeleton would be added to the collection at the University of Oklahoma. That same evening I attended the monthly meeting of the Session at the church. As I parked and got out of my car I was conscious of a loud, insistent *cheep, cheep, cheep*—the food cries of a young Barn Owl—coming from the top of the old hotel. For fully five minutes I stood there in the street, looking toward the part of the building from which the calls seemed to come. At last an adult Barn Owl flew in, heading straight for the roof. As it entered a hole under the eave and disappeared, the food cries were noticeably accelerated and intensified. After the Session meeting, about two hours later (21:30), the calls of the young owl were

still emanating, loud and clear, from the hole under the eave. They continued unabated, perhaps because of the failure of an adult owl to appear, during my fifteen-minute vigil.

On 17 December I talked with the hotel's manager, who gave me permission to find the nest proper if I could. I ascertained that there was no attic above the top floor. Under the eave of the building's southwest wing there were three holes—one at each corner and one about half-way between these two. A fire-escape landing outside the hall window on the ninth floor was about 12 feet directly below the middle hole—the one into which I had seen the owl fly. To find the nest itself would have necessitated crawling through the hole. This I decided not to attempt.

The specimen found on 9 December was a fully fledged young male. George M. Sutton, who prepared the skin (UOMZ 6626), found no evidence that the bird had been shot. According to Dr. Sutton "it probably had been struck by a car, for its skull was badly crushed. All of its bones, even the largest, were soft. It was fairly fat (weight 480.7 grams; stomach empty). Buffy white down clung to many of the teleoptiles (adult-type feathers) of the flanks as well as to several of the lesser wing coverts and scapulars. These downy feathers were not, strictly speaking, of the natal down, but rather of a down that follows the natal down and that precedes the first winter teleoptiles (see Bent, 1938, U. S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 170, p. 144). The young owl was probably flying well on 9 December, though it may not have been obtaining all of its own food on that date."

At least one of the young owl's siblings was still at or near the nest site on 9 December. I do not know when that sibling actually left the nest. In any event, 9 December is a late date for fledging in Oklahoma. According to Witherby *et al.* (1948, Handbook of British birds, 2: 344), the fledging period of *Tyto alba* is about 60 days and the incubation period at least 30 days. Using these figures, we are justified in believing that eggs were laid in the Severs Hotel nest in early September 1969. The fact that the nesting was successful is noteworthy. In Payne County, central Oklahoma, a Barn Owl nest that contained "several eggs" on 1 October 1939, did not produce young (Baumgartner and Howell, 1942, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 42: 59. Had those eggs started hatching the following day, the oldest of the brood would have fledged about 2 December. Had they started hatching on 1 November, the oldest of the brood would have fledged about 31 December. Guess-work of this sort is permissible, even desirable, in view of the fact that *Tyto alba* is one of the most widely distributed, hence one of the most successful, of the world's birds (see Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 250).—James L. Norman, 502 N. 14th Street, Muskogee, Oklahoma 74401, 5 March 1970.

**Long-eared Owl in Creek County, Oklahoma, in August.**—On 8 August 1970 I drove with my family from Little Rock, Arkansas, to Heyburn Reservoir State Park, about ten miles southwest of Sapulpa, Creek County, northeastern Oklahoma. We arrived about 02:00. At 02:30 I happened to see a large bird fly under a street light. Walking closer, I perceived that the bird had alighted on a pole and that it was crow-size. Approaching to within about 15 feet, I clearly saw the long, closely spaced ear-tufts, yellow eyes, and streaked

underparts of a Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*). I continued to watch the owl until about 03:00, when it flew off.

At 06:00 I flushed the same (or another) Long-eared Owl from bushes along the shore of the reservoir. Between 06:00 and 08:00 I put a Long-eared Owl to flight four times in the same general area. I made no attempt to follow each bird as it flew up; the impression created was of several birds, perhaps a family group.

The Long-eared Owl has not previously been reported from anywhere in Oklahoma during "July, August, or September" (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 263).—Gary R. Graves, 7424 Redwood Drive, Little Rock, Arkansas 72209, 5 October 1970.

**Western Tanager in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, in August.**—On 20 August 1968, William A. Carter and I observed an adult male Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*) among the thick-set clumps of salt cedar and scattered cottonwood saplings fringing the Cimarron River 13 mi. north of Boise City, Cimarron County, Oklahoma. The day was windy. For some time we had been following loose flocks of Chipping Sparrows (*Spizella passerina*) and Lark Sparrows (*Chondestes grammacus*) about, hoping to find unusual fringillids among them. Bullock's Orioles (*Icterus bullockii*) in first winter feather were numerous, but difficult to observe. When the tanager appeared we recognized it instantly. Though we saw it several times, we were never very close to it and we failed to ascertain whether it had any red on its head. It appeared to be in breeding plumage, but the adult male of this species is very bright in winter, in this respect being radically different from the adult male of its congener, the Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*). The adult male Western Tanager in winter is, according to Chapman (1918, *Bird-Lore*, 20: 20), like the adult in summer "but the head is yellow washed with dusky, without, or with but a trace of red, the back [plumage] is edged with greenish, and, the tertials are tipped with yellowish."

The presence of a Western Tanager in Oklahoma in August must not be considered proof that the species breeds in the state. In New Mexico, where Western Tanagers breed commonly in the mountains, "they are known to be early migrants, having been found far south of the breeding grounds by the third week in July and probably somewhat earlier" (Bailey, 1928, *Birds of New Mexico*, p. 665). In my book *Oklahoma Birds* (1967, p. 563), the earliest fall date mentioned for *Piranga ludoviciana* is September 2; on that date, in 1963, John S. Shackford saw a Western Tanager among willows along Texakeet Creek 3 mi. southeast of Kenton, Cimarron County, Oklahoma.—George M. Sutton, *Stovall Museum of Science and History, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73069*, 2 April 1969.

THE BULLETIN, the official scientific 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. \$4.00 single or \$6.00 family per year. Treasurer, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Doane, 9912 Mahler Place, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73120; Editor, Sophia C. Mery, 345 S. E. Boston Ave., Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74003.