

DISCOVERY OF THE VERDIN IN SOUTHWESTERN
OKLAHOMA

BY KENNETH D. SEYFFERT

In the early afternoon on 3 May 1971, about half a mile west of Eldorado, Jackson County, southwestern Oklahoma, in the narrow strip of woodland lining Lebos (or Sandy) Creek, I found a Verdin (*Auriparus flaviceps*). Sightings of this species by John S. Weske in northern Texas (see Seyffert, 1971, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 4: 3) had led me to search for suitable Verdin habitat in adjacent parts of Oklahoma. Earlier that day I had found a typical Verdin's nest—obviously an old one—about 4½ feet up in a clump of Christmas cholla



FEMALE VERDIN AT NEST

Photographed during first week of June 1940 by Samuel A. Grimes in Cameron County, Texas. Nest was five and one-half feet up and held four eggs. The "more colorful" male was close by, protesting the photographer's "meddling."

(*Opuntia leptocaulis*). While examining this nest, which was made largely of twigs of sage (*Artemisia* sp.), I heard what I thought must be a Verdin calling. The loud, clear notes continued for some time, almost without letup. Finally I located the bird as it moved about in a mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*). It was indeed a Verdin—the first, so far as I know, to have been seen in Oklahoma. The brightness of its yellow head convinced me that it was a male. In the same general area I found a second old-looking Verdin nest about 6 feet up near the end of a long horizontal branch in a netleaf hackberry (*Celtis reticulata*).

About 30 yards southeast of this second old nest, and about 50 yards from the creek, I found a third nest, this one at the end of a long horizontal hackberry branch about 6½ feet over open ground—and only partly built. Concealing myself, I kept watch for about an hour (13:15 to 14:30). A single bright-headed Verdin—almost certainly the very bird I had seen earlier in the day—visited the nest at five- to ten-minute intervals, remaining in the nest for some time (about 30 seconds to fully two minutes) at each visit. It continued to call while away from the nest, but at the nest it was silent. I saw no other Verdin anywhere in the area.

I visited the nest again on 23 May, when there were four eggs, and on 30 May, when there were two eggs and two small young. I did not know, of course, when the last egg had been laid, or when incubation had begun, but it was obvious that the parent birds were more attentive on the latter date than on the former. On 23 May I observed the nest carefully for 86 minutes (12:21 to 13:47), during which period the female was in the nest 46 minutes, the male 12 minutes, a total of 58 minutes or 67% of the time. On 30 May, when I observed the nest for 180 minutes (10:00 to 13:00), the female was in the nest 132 minutes and the male 14 minutes, a total of 146 minutes, or 81% of the time. Both birds approached and left the nest directly and rapidly, so it was necessary to keep close watch. On 30 May, as I prepared to leave the area, I decided that the female must have flown from the nest without my seeing her; but when I poked my finger into the nest, there she was. Refusing to leave, she let me stroke her head and gently probe about; but when I withdrew my finger she darted out, alighted in a tree close by and moved about excitedly, calling softly. Remaining near, she flew from tree to tree, but refused to go to the nest-tree until the male flew to the nest. Just after he had entered, she too went in, whereupon the male left. Reassured by the behavior of her mate, the female remained in the nest.

When I next visited Lebos Creek, on 27 June, the Verdin calls that I heard seemed more subdued and less persistent than they had in May. Before reaching the nest, I came upon two young birds in a mesquite tree. These were instantly recognizable as Verdins from their shape, behavior, and coloration, though their heads were not yellow. Presently the male parent joined them. I

watched him feed the young at frequent intervals. A third juvenal joined the group and also received food from the adult male, but I did not see the adult female. On checking the nest, I found it to be empty. One young bird remained unaccounted for. Possibly it was in a wholly different area, attended by the female parent.

The behavior of the adult male that day surprised me. For a time he made what appeared to be an effort to scatter the three young—i.e., force them to find food without his assistance. This accomplished, he devoted his time to nest-building. During a little more than an hour of observation (11:55 to 13:01), he carried in seven loads of nest-material. Much of what he brought he found on the ground. On two visits he deposited material and left immediately, but on each of five visits he worked diligently for up to fully two minutes fitting together what he had brought. During this time the young birds were not far away. I heard them occasionally. They made no attempt to help with the nest-building.

On 11 July I found the new nest domed over, but far from finished. It was a mere open-work shell of twigs, with some downy material hanging from the hole at the front. I waited close by for an hour and a half. During this period a Verdin visited the nest once, and this bird was young. My notes, written at the time (10:38), read thus:

“Juvenal came to nest tree with rather large batch of downy plant material in its mouth. Flew to nest but did not enter and immediately flew down to branch below it. Seemed to be having difficulty in keeping the material in its mouth for it gave several up-and-down jabbing motions as though it was trying to get a more secure hold of the mass. Flew up to the nest entrance and awkwardly attempted to enter. Didn't succeed so thrust material into hole but when it withdrew its head the material came with it. Previously it seemed as though it were having trouble in keeping it in its mouth but now it seemed it couldn't get rid of it. Made another try and dumped all of the material into nest, successfully this time. Immediately flew to nearby tree where it began feeding, and remained in area for several minutes intermittently calling softly.”

The above-reported behavior strongly suggests that the recently-fledged young Verdin learns something about nest-building while its parent brings food and also builds the nest. The parent that I watched on 27 June was a male. The nest it worked at may, admittedly, have been only a male dormitory or “male winter nest” (see Gilman, 1902, *Condor*, 4: 88-89), but the structure was, even when only partly finished, wonderfully complex and strong.

The narrow strip of native vegetation along Lebos Creek consists principally of mature mesquite about 20 feet high, some stands of which are dense, but the leaf canopy is so thin that grass grows luxuriantly under it. The whole strip is heavily grazed. Where there are openings in the mesquite “forest,”

scattered hackberries grow. Very near the creek there are willows (*Salix* spp.), soapberries (*Sapindus drummondii*), and a few cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*), all of them much higher than the mesquite. Not far from the town of Eldorado there is an open area just south of the creek throughout which Christmas cholla and sage are dominant. The Verdins seemed to prefer the more open woodland for both nesting and foraging; I never saw one in the denser growth.

Southwestern Oklahoma has suffered from severe drought during recent years. On my first visit to Eldorado, the aridity of the countryside thereabouts was striking. John Weske, in a letter to me dated 26 May 1971, expressed his belief that the desert condition now prevailing in southwestern Oklahoma and southward through central Texas might have had a good deal to do with the Verdin's spread northward. He went so far as to question whether the Verdin would continue to survive in Oklahoma if the drought stopped. Careful observations just to the north and south of the Red River obviously should continue. Other "new" species than the Verdin may have made their way into Oklahoma.

2709 SOUTH FAIRFIELD STREET, AMARILLO, TEXAS 79103, 24 OCTOBER 1971.

GENERAL NOTES

Nesting of American Avocet in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.—Early in the afternoon on 5 July 1971 (day partly cloudy; air temperature in the 90's at noon) my class in ornithology and I visited the sewage ponds along the northeast edge of Boise City, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma. We found no birds at the ponds themselves, but at a long, narrow, water-filled ditch across the road just north of the ponds we found four adult and four tiny chick American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*). The pair with the brood were much concerned. They flew back and forth over us, crying out noisily, occasionally alighting near one of the chicks, which were about 4 inches high, had blue legs like those of the adults, and were pale brownish gray throughout their upper parts. The chicks were probably at the water's edge when we arrived at the ponds, but when we first saw them they were well apart from each other in a plowed field just north of the ditch. On being pursued, each chick would run a short way, then crouch and "freeze," becoming almost impossible to see against the dry soil.

Breeding has not previously been reported for this species in Oklahoma west of Harper County. Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 207), who listed *Recurvirostra americana* as a "transient and summer resident . . . commoner in central and western Oklahoma than in eastern," reported its breeding regularly on the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma; he further stated that in 1957 several pairs nested in Harper County (just east of the Panhandle) "when playa basins near Rosston held water all season," and that in 1954 the species nested near Clayton, New Mexico, about 40 miles southwest of Boise City, Oklahoma.—Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biology, Cameron College, Lawton, Oklahoma 73501, 2 August 1971.*

Blue Jay destroys cowbird-parasitized nest of Painted Bunting.—On 9 June 1968, while trimming a climbing rosebush in our back yard in Lawton,

Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma, we discovered the nest of a Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*) about 4 feet from the ground. In the nest were one egg of the bunting and two eggs of the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*). The three eggs resembled each other closely, those of the cowbird each measuring about 15 x 21 mm., that of the bunting 13 x 21. We did not mark the eggs. Five days later (14 June) the nest contained what we believed to have been the same three eggs. On 16 June there was an additional cowbird egg.

On 19 June we visited the nest at 15:00, finding in it one bunting egg and two cowbird eggs. Puzzled by the disappearance of the one egg, we kept an eye on the rosebush. At 18:30 we saw a Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) go to the bush, make its way to the nest, and fly with an egg in its bill to a pecan branch overhanging a garden shed. We did not see the jay eat the egg, but when we examined the shed roof moments later we found eggshell remains. The following morning, at 07:45, the nest held one cowbird egg. At 18:30 that evening we saw a jay near the nest. At 18:45 the nest was empty.

During the above-discussed 12-day period we did not observe the female bunting on the nest, though we saw her and her bright mate from time to time. While the jay was at and near the nest neither bunting (so far as we could see) attempted to drive the predator off. We never saw a cowbird approaching or leaving the nest.

Although the Painted Bunting is often parasitized by the cowbird (Friedmann, 1929, The cowbirds, p. 231; Parmelee, 1959, Bird-banding, 30: 14; Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 583), very few observations of fledgling cowbirds attended by Painted Buntings have been reported. The Blue Jay is, of course, notorious as a predator on the eggs and young of other birds, especially those smaller than itself.—Janet M. McGee and Louis E. McGee, 1703 N. 43rd St., Lawton, Oklahoma 73501, 19 February 1970.

Red-breasted Nuthatch observed in central Oklahoma in June carrying suet to two other Red-breasted Nuthatches.—From 18 to 23 June 1970, at my banding station on Silver Lake in the northwestern part of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, I repeatedly observed from one to four Red-breasted Nuthatches (*Sitta canadensis*). The dates for these sightings are extraordinary: the Red-breasted Nuthatch usually has left Oklahoma for the summer by the middle of May (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 397).

Sitta canadensis is not known to breed south of the northern United States except in the mountains (1957, AOU Check-list, p. 399). It "summers" in certain montane parts of New Mexico (Hubbard, 1970, Check-list of the birds of New Mexico, p. 62), but has not been found actually breeding there. In Colorado it breeds "regularly" in mountains in the northern part of the state but "comparatively few nests have been found" (Bailey and Niedrach, 1965, Birds of Colorado, 2: 581-2). I am, in other words, at a loss to explain the presence of the birds in Oklahoma in mid-June. Furthermore, the behavior that I observed was puzzling. One bird, a pale-breasted individual that I believed to be an adult female, I saw repeatedly from 18 to 22 June; another, a dark-breasted bird that I took to be an adult male, I saw from 20 to 23 June, invariably in an elm or juniper in my yard, never at a feeder.

On 20 June I saw also three pale-breasted birds that seemed to keep apart from this dark-breasted "male." One of this threesome was probably the "adult female" referred to above; the other two looked young. The three birds moved through a juniper close to a "walk-in" trap, calling noisily. On 22 June I saw what I believed to be the same three birds, again apart from the dark-breasted "male." On that date one of the three flew from the feeder with suet in its bill directly (for a distance of about 35 feet) to the other two, which were perched not far from each other on a Chinese elm branch about 20 feet from the ground with wings fluttering. On alighting, the suet-carrying bird appeared to feed first one, then the other. I could not see precisely what happened, for all three birds were partly hidden by leaves, but the suet-carrying bird certainly did not try to wedge the suet into a crevice in the bark. After what appeared to be food transferral the wing fluttering stopped. I did not see or hear a Red-breasted Nuthatch in my yard after 23 June.

I hasten to make clear that I do not offer the above as proof that the Red-breasted Nuthatch nested at or near Silver Lake in the summer of 1970. I continue to believe, however, that what I observed on 22 June was the feeding of two young birds by an adult. A review of observations during the preceding winter is in order. On 8 November 1969 I saw two Red-breasted Nuthatches with several Golden-crowned Kinglets (*Regulus satrapa*) and Ruby-crowned Kinglets (*R. calendula*) in my yard. On 15 November I counted four Red-breasted Nuthatches with the kinglets. From 15 to 22 November I saw both dark-breasted and pale-breasted Red-breasted Nuthatches repeatedly at my suet-feeder, occasionally as many as three birds at a time. For a week or so after 22 November I saw no Red-breasted Nuthatches, but toward Christmas they re-appeared. Off and on throughout February and early March I saw them. Toward the end of March they again disappeared.

Then—this time much to my surprise—I saw a pale-breasted bird on 9 May. I recorded the date with care, believing that the sighting would surely prove to be the last for the season. But no: on 6 June I again saw a pale-breasted bird at the feeder, and again assumed that I would not see the species again. From 7 to 17 June I saw no Red-breasted Nuthatch anywhere, but on 18 June the pale-breasted bird showed up, on 20 June the dark-breasted "male" showed up, and on 22 June I witnessed the suet-carrying episode reported above.—V. J. Vacin, Route 2, Box 123, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73114.

A persistent pair of Carolina Wrens.—During the summer of 1969, while I was working at a Boy Scout camp on Grand Lake, in Ottawa County, north-eastern Oklahoma, I observed a pair of Carolina Wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) repeatedly at close range. The birds nested in my tent. Having read of the "shyness and timidity" of Carolina Wrens in their "woodland haunts," and especially of the female bird's habit of slipping from her nest "quietly and unobserved" (Bent, 1948, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 195, p. 210), I was surprised to find the pair in my tent not at all shy. For almost a month my tentmate and I observed their comings and goings daily. Occasionally up to seven persons gathered to wait for and watch the wrens.

The pair started their nest about 10 June. On that date I found a pile of dead pine needles and oak leaves on a table at the rear of the tent. I

discarded the pile, thinking it debris blown in by the wind. I discarded another pile the following day and a third on 12 June. When, on 13 June, I found a fourth pile in a tissue box on the table, I decided to learn—if I could—how it got there. Presently I saw a wren enter under the tent's wall. It went straight to the unfinished nest. From its largeness, buffy underparts, and reddish brown upperparts I knew that it was a Carolina Wren.

After this first observation, I saw both birds carrying in nest material. They entered and left the tent via the open doors and beneath the walls. Wrens were seen entering other tents in the area also, but these may well have been other wrens than those that nested in my tent.

The nest in my tent was completed on 15 June and the first egg laid on 16 June. An egg was laid each day through 20 June. The complete clutch consisted of five eggs, each speckled with brown and measuring about 19 mm. long. The incubating adult became so confiding that I could touch and measure the nest and take flash photographs without frightening it off. The five young hatched on 5 and 6 July. I noticed egg-shell in the nest on the 6th. Down on the tiny chicks was especially noticeable on the capital and spinal tracts. The eyes of all five chicks were open on 12 July. From 6 to 12 July I often watched the parent wrens foraging for food among dead oak leaves on the ground not far from the tent. On one occasion I saw both parents together in the tent, each with a spider in its bill.

At the end of the first regular camp session, I was gone for the weekend. When I returned on 14 July I found that the nest, together with all my belongings, had been set out in the sun by the three persons who were moving into the tent. I had been transferred to a cabin. In the nest were the dead chicks.

A similar experience with the tameness of nesting Carolina Wrens was described by Thomas D. Burleigh (1958, Georgia birds, p. 432). The pair he wrote about built a nest in a cook tent at a camp in Towns County, northeastern Georgia. The incubating bird at that nest was apparently undisturbed "even when stroked on the back" by the two men who also lived in the tent.—David Paul Hendricks, 956 Yale Drive, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74003. 20 June 1971.

Recent nesting of Mountain Bluebird in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.—On 8 May 1971, among cottonwood, hackberry, and willow trees fringing the Cimarron River about 9 miles east of Kenton, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma, we saw a male Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*). The date was decidedly late for an over-wintering individual of that species, but we did not even consider the possibility that the bird might be breeding. The following morning, in the same stretch of woods, we saw the male bird again and flushed the female from a nest—a cup of dead grass and weed fibers, scantily lined with feathers, in a small woodpecker hole about 9 feet up in a partly dead willow with diameter-breast-high of about 8 inches. The seven eggs were slightly incubated. Nowhere in the vicinity did we see or hear an Eastern Bluebird (*S. sialis*), a species known to breed in that area (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 437). After photographing the birds, using a 400 mm. lens, we collected the eggs and nest. These we have deposited at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range.

The Mountain Bluebird winters regularly in the Black Mesa country of Oklahoma, sometimes in great numbers. It has not been found nesting there, however, since the days of R. Crompton Tate, who found "4 or 5 nests around the mouth of an old copper mine prospect hole" near Kenton in 1922 and 1923 (Tate, 1925, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 4: 32-33; Nice, 1931, Birds of Oklahoma, p. 145).

Mountain Bluebirds seen in Oklahoma after the first week in April, or possibly even after the middle of February, should be watched closely, on the chance that they may be nesting. A pair observed by George M. Sutton on 28 February 1954, near Vinson, Harmon County, southwestern Oklahoma, had a nest that appeared to be ready for eggs (Sutton, *op. cit.*). A pair observed near Kenton by W. Marvin Davis on 22 April 1961 might well have been breeding, but Dr. Davis did not find a nest. A single bird observed flying about farm buildings near Eva, Texas County, on 27 April 1932 may or may not have had a mate (Henderson, 1933, Birds and mammals of Texas County, Oklahoma, Master's Thesis, University of Kansas, p. 264). A pair observed along the edge of Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, by Harold S. Cooksey and his wife Hazel on 21 April 1951 had an unfinished nest 9 feet up in a cranny in a small frame building. The parent birds were observed carrying food to this nest on 27 May; two "well-feathered young" were in it on 2 June; and "at least one" chick was in it on 4 June (Riggs, 1956, Wilson Bull., 68: 72).—Marvin D. Schwilling, *Cheyenne Bottoms, Route 1, Great Bend, Kansas 67530*, and C. W. Comer, *321 South East Street, Emporia, Kansas 66801*, 28 June 1971.

Recovery in north-central Oklahoma of Boat-tailed Grackle banded in central Oklahoma.—On 27 November 1971, just after the first snow storm of the season, Oren A. Mills found dead under a cherry tree in his yard in Enid, Garfield County, north-central Oklahoma, a female Boat-tailed Grackle (*Cassidix mexicanus*) that had been banded (563-41543) as an almost-fledged nestling by George M. Sutton and me at Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, on 17 May 1970. The bird appeared to be in good shape. There was no blood on its plumage or other evidence that it had been killed by a predator or shot. It might have struck a wire. Enid is about 90 miles north (and slightly west) of Norman. Whether the bird had nested in Enid or not, it had certainly moved well northward during the 18 months of its life span.—Warren D. Harden, *1609 Rosemont Drive, Norman, Oklahoma 73069*, 21 March 1972.

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