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THE BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD IN WEST-CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

BY INA S. BROWN

THE hummingbirds of the western half of the main body of Oklahoma have long been thought to be Ruby-throats (*Archilochus colubris*), but some of them are Black-chins (*A. alexandri*). The latter species was not even mentioned by Mrs. Nice in her "Birds of Oklahoma" (1931); Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 286) called it a "transient and summer visitant in western Oklahoma" but cited no breeding record. Of 38 carefully identified Ruby-throat specimens (13 adult males:



HUMMINGBIRD NEST IN ELK CITY, OKLAHOMA

The female hummingbird that built this nest (shown here actual size) was a Ruby-throat, a Black-chin, or a Ruby-throat x Black-chin hybrid. The only male hummingbird seen in the vicinity that season (May 1971) was a Black-chin. The two eggs were knocked out by a hailstorm. Photograph by James R. Purdue.

nine males in first winter feather; 16 females, several of them in first winter feather) in the bird collection at the University of Oklahoma not one was taken west of Oklahoma, Cleveland, McClain, and Marshall counties. Hummingbirds seen in midsummer in "Woods, Canadian, Caddo, Comanche, and Love counties" (Sutton, *op. cit.*, p. 285) have been assumed to be breeding Ruby-throats, but fully documented sightings from these counties and from the vast area west of them are surprisingly few, and virtually no such sighting has been fully reported in print.

In Clinton, Custer County, west-central Oklahoma, J. H. Pedigo and his wife Harriet have been seeing adult male Ruby-throats summer after summer since about 1940. During the same period I, too, have been seeing them not only in Clinton but also in Elk City, Beckham County. The Pedigos and I have assumed right along that female hummers seen by us were also Ruby-throats. The thought crosses my mind that, having seen what we knew to be male Ruby-throats from time to time, we assumed (without checking carefully) that all dark-throated birds were Ruby-throats. In any event, I now know that the Black-chin must be watched for in our area.

At Elk City I first saw what I knew to be a Black-chinned Hummingbird on 24 April 1968. The male bird was feeding about the tubular flowers of red trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) only a few feet from my kitchen window. I saw a male bird there again on 26 April. On 4 May, in Clinton, the Pedigos and I saw a male Black-chin at red trumpet honeysuckle flowers at the Pedigo residence. Since 1968 I have seen at least one male Black-chin in Elk City on several occasions each summer, chiefly between 25 April and 25 May, but occasionally in July or August.

From mid-May to mid-July 1969, in Clinton, the Pedigos regularly observed a male Black-chin and a female bird that they assumed to be a Black-chin. The birds visited red trumpet honeysuckle flowers and a sugar-water feeder at their house. On the evening of 30 July 1971 I saw an adult male Black-chin and two hummers that were obviously females or young birds feeding about red sage (*Salvia* sp.) in my yard in Elk City. The adult male chased the other two a great deal. All three of them rested occasionally on the clothesline.

The above-cited midsummer sightings gave the Pedigos and me the feeling that the Black-chin might be nesting in our part of Oklahoma.

On 7 April 1971 my friend Eva Cheesman observed a male Black-chin feeding about wild currant (*Ribes odoratum*) 6 miles west and 2 miles north of Elk City. On 9 May Mrs. Cheesman observed a female hummingbird building a nest near the end of a slender drooping twig about 4½ feet from the ground in a climbing rosebush close to a small entry porch and about 3 feet from a picture window on the north side of the Paul Hughes residence at 324 West Country Club Drive (the house next to the Cheesman residence). On 12 May I closely inspected this nest myself. It appeared on that date to have no lichens, but lichens were added later. We tried

taking photographs, but these did not turn out well. Mrs. Cheesman watched the bird and its nest closely. One egg was in it on 16 May, two eggs on 17 May. For a day or so the bird was suspicious and excitable, but by 20 May it had settled down to steady incubation.

On 29 May, George M. Sutton and Troy L. Best inspected the nest and tried taking photographs of the bird. These were not good, though they showed the bird to be very long-billed—a character of *A. alexandri*.

On 30 May, at about 17:00, a light hailstorm, followed by heavy rain, then by more hail, struck Elk City from the west. The nest and devoted bird came through it all unscathed. Then another hailstorm struck, this time from the north, and, even as Mrs. Hughes watched from the window, a hailstone hit the nest. The bird clung to the tiny structure and resumed her position in it, but the eggs must have been knocked out, for they were not in the nest the following day. On 1 June the bird was observed to visit the nest several times, on 2 June once; after that she was not seen by anyone.

At no time during the period from 9 May to 2 June did anyone see a male Black-chin at or near the nest. On 6 June, however, Mrs. Cheesman saw a male bird at hollyhock flowers in her yard. She was out of town from 7 to 17 June. On her return she saw no hummingbird of any sort in her neighborhood. Convinced that the nest was not to be used further, we collected it on 1 August. It is now in the collection at the University of Oklahoma.

Taxonomists may well question whether the female bird discussed above was actually a Black-chinned Hummingbird. At least one known-to-be-breeding female specimen should, of course, be collected in west-central Oklahoma and carefully measured. If the Elk City female was a Ruby-throat, then interbreeding of the two species might have been taking place, a phenomenon that would explain such allegedly hybrid adult males as that reported from Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, by Vacin (1969, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 2: 15) and mentioned by Mayr and Short (1970, Publ. Nuttall Orn. Club, No. 9, pp. 53-54).

106 SUNSET, ELK CITY, OKLAHOMA 73644, 30 SEPTEMBER 1971.

CASSIN'S SPARROW IN NOBLE COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN GRULA

The Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*), a "transient and summer resident in western Oklahoma," has not heretofore been seen in the state farther east than Grant, Oklahoma, Cleveland, McClain, and Love counties (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 616); it has not been known to occur regularly in any of these counties, however, and its breeding has been documented for only one of them, Cleveland (Johnson, 1956, Wilson Bull., 68: 75-76; Sutton, *op. cit.*). The species inhabits flat or gently rolling, semi-arid, comparatively treeless country.

During the spring and summer of 1971 I repeatedly observed a small population of Cassin's Sparrows in southeastern Noble County, about 5 miles north-

west of the city of Stillwater, in an area slightly east of the counties mentioned above. The birds were living in what had been a wheat field, a flat expanse left to fallow, not far from the recently impounded Lake McMurtry. The Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus saviannarum*) and Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*) also inhabited the area, both species being quite common there. On a few occasions I observed a Dickcissel chasing a Cassin's Sparrow. The most important plants of the habitat were, according to Berry (1971, The nesting biology of the Dickcissel . . . in north-central Oklahoma, Master's Thesis, Oklahoma State University, p. 10), the following: Annual Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*), Curlycup Gumweed (*Grindelia squarrosa*), Johnsongrass (*Sorghum halapense*), White Sweet Clover (*Melilotus alba*), Sow Thistle (*Sonchus arvensis*), Japanese Brome (*Bromus japonicus*), and Horseweed (*Conyza canadensis*).

I first noted the Cassin's Sparrows at about 10:00 on 24 May. My sister, Marge Grula, was with me that morning. One bird was flight-singing—"skylarking" in typical manner—two or three times a minute. We noticed a few calls of other sorts from the ground, but since we did not see the birds we could not be sure that Cassin's Sparrows were making the sounds. I called John S. Barclay, of the Department of Zoology at Oklahoma State University, telling him of my find. Dr. Barclay and I returned the following morning, collected one singing bird, noted two or three other "skylarking" individuals, and again heard from the ground calls that we could not be sure of.

Between 25 May and 5 June the lake deepened, parts of the Cassin's Sparrow habitat were inundated, the vegetation throughout unflooded parts grew taller, and the number of Cassin's Sparrows seemed to decrease. On 5 June I saw only three birds, one of which was flight-singing. On 12 June I saw one bird, but heard none. On 24 June I observed one bird, and that individual was flight-singing. I last saw the species on 11 July, when Deloris Isted, of Cushing, Oklahoma, and I, after much searching, found one bird that called infrequently from a weedstalk, but that did no flight-singing. The lake did not rise appreciably between 5 June and 11 July, so the Cassin's Sparrow habitat remained virtually unchanged—save for increase in the height of the vegetation—during that period.

ROUTE 2, STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA 74074, 9 SEPTEMBER 1971.

GENERAL NOTES

Recent breeding of Anhinga in Oklahoma.—The Anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*) has been seen from time to time in Oklahoma since the fall of 1913. Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 21) called the species an "irregular summer and fall visitor . . . from April 9 to October 29." Its nesting in 1937 (ten pairs) in the southeasternmost corner of the state was reported by Nice (1938, Auk, 55: 121-122). Many bird students have believed that felling of the big cypresses in McCurtain County has been responsible for the species' apparent disappearance from Oklahoma as a nesting bird in recent years.

In September of 1971 (exact date not recorded) I observed a pair of An-

hingas feeding a young bird on the Robert S. Kerr Reservoir in Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge in Sequoyah County, east-central Oklahoma. The young Anhinga, though almost as large as its parents, had not yet developed flight powers. It was about 10 feet above water in a willow—one of hundreds of trees that had been partly submerged as the reservoir had filled. Many herons—mostly Common Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*), but some Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) — had nested that season in the immediate vicinity. In the tree below the young Anhinga was a platform of twigs, perhaps an old nest.

The following spring I made a point of looking for Anhingas in that area. On 22 April I noted that about 90% of the willows had died as a result of continued submersion. That day I saw neither egrets nor night herons but flushed two pairs of Anhingas and found two Anhinga nests about 40 yards apart, each about 10 feet above water in a living willow, one (Nest 1) holding two light blue eggs, the other (Nest 2) empty but lined with fresh willow twigs. Each nest had been used before, presumably the preceding year. A third nest (Nest 3), about 50 yards from the spot at which I had seen the young bird being fed, contained the skeletal remains of a young Anhinga.

On 2 May, Nest 1 was empty; in its lining there were no fresh willow twigs. In a tree about 11 feet away a Black Rat Snake (*Elaphe obsoleta*) was coiled under an old egret nest. I caught and killed the snake (41 inches long), finding in it the remains of four light blue eggs. From Nest 2 an Anhinga flushed as I approached. In the nest, which was lined with many fresh willow twigs, were four eggs.

On 26 May I found Nest 1 deserted. Coiled up in Nest 2 was another Black Rat Snake. I shot this one (42 inches long), finding the remains of four eggs inside it. Nowhere did I see an adult Anhinga that day.

On 16 July I came upon a pair of Anhingas in a wholly different area—a rookery of Common Egrets about 3 miles from the heronry in which I had found the three Anhinga nests. Here the egret nests were in large, partly-dead elms and cottonwoods.

On 29 July, James L. Norman, Herbert Keating, his wife Polly, and I visited the egret colony. As we approached, we saw a female Anhinga leaving a nest (Nest 4) in which we could see the heads of two young birds that appeared to be less than a week old. We did not climb the tree to look into the nest, which was about 25 feet above the water. We saw three Anhingas in the area.

On 20 August, Norman, his wife Marion, Everett Grigsby and I visited Nest 4, finding an adult Anhinga standing on it and four well developed young birds lined up on a limb nearby. We saw two other adult Anhingas in the vicinity.

On 23 August I returned to Nest 4, hoping to photograph the young birds, but they attempted to fly and would not allow close approach. On 29 August I saw seven Anhingas in the egret rookery area, all of them of adult size.—Philip W. Norton, *Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge, P. O. Box 398, Sallisaw, Oklahoma 74955, 22 February 1973.*

Cattle Egret in Payne County, Oklahoma.—The Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) has recently made its way into Payne County, north-central Oklahoma. It was first sighted there early in the morning on 6 April 1972, when William Graves saw two "all white" birds with his cattle just south of State Highway 33 about

4 miles west of Perkins. The two birds remained there all that day and until late afternoon on 7 April. At 17:30 on 9 April 1972 Garrell Moorman saw three short-legged "all white" birds in a pasture with cattle about 6 miles northwest of Perkins. On the evening of 18 July 1972 Herbert Shoup Jr., who lives just south of Ripley, between State Highway 108 and the Cimarron River, reported having seen two strange "dirty-white" birds in his pasture with the cattle since early that morning. He volunteered to take my sister, Mildred Rickstrew, and me in his pickup truck to see the birds. We drove to within about 15 feet of the "dirty-white birds" before they flew off a short way. The long bill and shortish legs were yellowish. The "dirt" was the buffy brown wash on the head, back, and chest. There could be no mistaking them; they were Cattle Egrets.

Bubulcus ibis was first sighted in Oklahoma on 20 April 1962, when Florel Helema and Addie Fromholz saw one on the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma (1962, Audubon Field Notes, 16: 426); in 1964 the species bred successfully in a heronry in Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma, where it had been observed repeatedly in summer in 1962 and 1963 by Anne Reynolds *et al.* (1964, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 44: 65); it has not heretofore been reported from Payne County.—Margaret Williamson, Box 67, Ripley, Oklahoma 74062, 1 February 1973.

Strange behavior of Least Bittern in Tillman County, Oklahoma.—On 6 May 1972, George A. Newman, nine students from Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas, and George M. Sutton witnessed the puzzling behavior of an adult male Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*) in a narrow stretch of cattail marsh close to and paralleling the Red River about 2 miles southwest of Davidson, Tillman County, southwestern Oklahoma. Ten of the party, all wading single-file in knee-deep water through the cattails, passed within two feet or so of the bittern without seeing it. The last person, Sheryl Clark, sighted it, pointed it out to J. F. Cadenhead, who was just in front of her, and the two of them sent word along that they had found a "dead bird" in the cattails a few inches above the water.

The party quickly surrounded the bittern. Suddenly someone saw the pale yellow eyes move or glitter and everyone marvelled at the way in which motionlessness and "dead cattail coloration" had camouflaged the bird. Though closely encircled, it did not move, even when Dr. Sutton reached his hand toward it. Grasped by his hand, the bird clung tightly to the cattail stalks: as Dr. Sutton lifted it, he had to pull hard to free it from the cattails.

After everyone had had a good look, Dr. Sutton released the bird, but it refused to fly. Instead it slipped slowly off, grasping the cattails several inches above the water-line. We caught it again, examined it carefully, and, finding no injury, tossed it into the air. Again it refused to fly. Fearing that it would not survive and knowing that there was no record of any sort of *Ixobrychus exilis* for Tillman County, Dr. Sutton decided to collect it. He prepared the specimen that afternoon, finding nothing obviously wrong with it, though the back of its neck near the head seemed to be slightly swollen or inflamed. It is now No. 7281 in the bird collection at the University of Oklahoma.—David K. Dean, 1790 N. 15th St., Abilene, Texas 79603, 4 September 1972.

White Ibis in Pushmataha County, Oklahoma.—In the early afternoon on 18 May 1972, William A. Carter and I flushed a single bright-plumaged adult White

Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) from a small slough about 6 miles northwest of Clayton, Pushmataha County, southeastern Oklahoma. The slough was enclosed by a dense stand of oaks (*Quercus* spp.) and willows (*Salix* spp.) so that only the center area was open water. Surrounding the wooded slough was a lush pasture in which several cattle were grazing. The ibis circled the low-lying area twice before flying off. We had an excellent look at the reddish face, bill, legs, and feet.

Eudocimus albus has, according to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 45), been reported from Marshall, Johnston, Choctaw, Tulsa, and Alfalfa counties; it has also been seen in McClain County (Mays, 1971, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 4: 15). It has not heretofore been reported from Pushmataha County. Since immature White Ibises are gray, they might easily pass unnoticed or be misidentified as ibises of another species.—John R. Schenck, *Department of Biology, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas 78666, 11 July 1972.*

Black Rat Snake nest-predation on Wood Duck in Oklahoma.—On 7 May 1969 Joe M. Taylor took me to the headwaters of Buckhorn Creek on the Lowrance Ranch 3 miles south of Sulphur, Murray County, south-central Oklahoma, to show me the nest of a Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*). As we approached the nest-tree, a large oak that leaned out over the creek, the female duck flew from the nest-cavity, which was 36 feet above the water. We climbed a tree close to the oak and could see three eggs in the nest. There might well have been more; we could not look directly down into the cavity.

Returning on 10 May, we saw a Black Rat Snake (*Elaphe obsoleta*) emerging from the nest-cavity. Taylor climbed the oak and captured the snake. In the cavity he found no eggs, but another Black Rat Snake instead. This one he also captured. In it were three noticeable swellings that "by feel" were eggs. The first snake had no swellings. Capture and removal of the snakes had, however, been spirited, so eggs inside both of them could have been broken. We did not kill and cut open the snakes to ascertain what they had swallowed.

The Wood Duck nested successfully in the same general area in 1966, though no one found the nest-cavity. On 28 April of that year John F. Reeves saw a female with three large, though still downy, ducklings in a small cattail-rimmed pond close to his several fishery ponds 5 miles south of Sulphur. At the same pond, the following day, George M. Sutton and Dan F. Penney saw what was probably the same female bird with seven ducklings.

The Black Rat Snake is listed as a nest-predator on the Wood Duck by Frank B. McGilvery (1968, A guide to Wood Duck production habitat requirements, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Resources Publ. No. 60, p. 16).—Jeff L. Williams, *Department of Biology, East Central State College, Ada, Oklahoma 74820, 11 July 1972.*

First Oklahoma record of House Sparrow fledging a cowbird.—At about 10:00 on 24 June 1972 I saw a female House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) feeding a young Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) in our backyard 9 miles due east of downtown Tulsa, Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma. The cowbird was on the ground not far from a feeder. The foster mother, who appeared to be part of a flock of sparrows, fed the cowbird several times with seeds from the feeder before the flock flew off, she and the cowbird with them. Later that day I several times watched the sparrow as she fed the cowbird in the yard.

She always flew off with the sparrow flock; the cowbird sometimes did. At about 20:00 I saw the cowbird alone on the ground under the feeder. It stood quiet for a while, pecked at (and possibly ate) some seed, then flew into a tree close by. Fifteen minutes later the foster mother appeared, fed the cowbird, and flew off with the sparrow flock. As darkness settled, the cowbird was still in the tree. I have no idea where it spent the night, but I saw its "mother" feed it again once the following morning.

Friedmann (1929, *The cowbirds*, p. 216), stating that the House Sparrow "seems to be practically free from the Cowbird's molestation," reported only one record (New York State) of the successful rearing of *Molothrus ater* by *Passer domesticus*. Later (1971, *Auk*, 88: 246) he reported two more records, both for Michigan. Sutton (1967, *Oklahoma birds*, p. 530) stated that there was "no evidence of cowbird parasitism [of the House Sparrow] in Oklahoma."—Lois Rodgers, 528 S. 107 East Ave., Tulsa, Oklahoma 74128, 29 June 1972.

Mockingbird eats flowers.—On the morning of 2 April 1968, on the campus of the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, I watched a Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) strike a Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) hard enough to make that considerably heavier bird squeal. The mocker then flew to the ground where it moved leisurely through the short grass eating fully opened flowers of the spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*). At first I thought the bird was catching insects, possibly honey-bees, but as I watched I saw the blossoms pulled from the stems, held for a split second between the mandibles, and swallowed. The Mockingbird ate at least a dozen of the blossoms before flying off.—George M. Sutton, *Stovall Museum of Science and History, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73069*, 22 March 1972.

Cassin's Sparrow in Grayson County, Texas.—On 15 May 1965, at the Texoma Nursery near Whitesboro, western Grayson County, north-central Texas, I observed a singing male Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*), a species I have never seen near Sherman, Texas, the city in which I have lived for the past ten years. Whitesboro is only about 20 miles west of Sherman. The sparrow was perching on the very top of a small juniper. It flew up time after time, singing its characteristic song once during each flight, returning to the same perch after the performance. If it had not been singing I would probably not even have seen it. The species very likely nested in that area, though I saw and heard only the one singing male. According to data filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, the Cassin's Sparrow may start breeding in late April in Oklahoma: on 1 May 1967 Robert D. Ohmart collected a set of four fresh eggs 5 miles north and 2 miles west of Elk City, Beckham County, west-central Oklahoma. The easternmost locality at which the species is known to have bred in Oklahoma is in southeastern Noble County, almost directly north of Whitesboro, Texas.—Karl W. Haller, *Box 1271, Austin College, Sherman, Texas 75090*, 30 May 1972.

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