



The Official Newsletter  
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## The Horned Lark

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### SPRING AND SUMMER BIRD SUMMARY/ March through July 89/ by Scott Seltman

Kansas birders found a respectable number of interesting birds during the Spring and Summer of 1989 considering the extremes of weather that we were forced to deal with throughout the period. Looking back over the bird summaries of the last two years one could conclude that your editor is obsessed with weather as I have often devoted more space to the weather report than to the good birds seen during a given period. But the fact is that since the Autumn of 1987 Kansans have seen some of the most extraordinary weather conditions in our state's history. And the Drought of '88 which seemed to end this summer may be extending into 1989 as well. Kansas just experienced the driest November on record with most National Weather Service reporting stations recording ZERO precipitation for the entire month.

The last few days of February 1989 were quite mild and many shorebirds and passerines seemed poised to begin spring migration well ahead of schedule. But March roared in like a lion with a record setting blast of cold air from the north and for the rest of the month we experienced wild swings in outdoor conditions. Here at Nekoma on March 4 the temperature ranged between 0 and 12 degrees F with a steady 40 MPH breeze from the north. Just a week later on March 11 the daytime high was 88 F. On March 14 a major dust storm struck the state with hurricane force winds clawing away at topsoil that in many cases had seen minimal rain for at least 12 months. At this point members of the older generation, who had until this time vigorously denied any current resemblance between the late 80's and the "Dirty Thirties", finally admitted that the current drought at least reminded them of their youth. April was also very dry and windy with frequent duststorms in the West and major temperature variations statewide. While many low temperature records had been broken in the previous two months, late April saw record heat with the mercury breaking 100°F at many western localities on the 22nd, 23rd, and 24th. Never before had such a strong heat wave been recorded so early in spring.

Finally in May the rains began. Thunderstorms that had been occurring in eastern Colorado for about ten days finally moved into Kansas on May 13 and for the next month-and-a-half many areas of the state received more rain than they had during the last year-and-a-half. By early June some areas of southcentral Kansas were actually having flooding problems and some localities ended the month with over 20 inches of rain! This month also set many records for low

temperatures. Many areas of northwest Kansas flirted with frost on the incredible dates of June 14 and 15 with morning lows in the upper 30's. And on June 22 the daytime highs in westcentral Kansas were lower than the previous record lows for the date. The daytime high of 53°F in Dodge City was about 20 degrees below the normal minimum temperature! In July the weather seemed a bit more normal although the characteristic heat waves never really materialized. It should be mentioned that while most areas of the state received generous amounts of rain in late spring and early summer, there were isolated areas of dryness that persisted right through the summer months.

The numbers of migrating birds seemed very low in the western half of the state until the rains began in May. Trips to Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira were particularly depressing in early spring with overall numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds at incredibly low levels. As reported in the last Horned Lark, Cheyenne Bottoms was virtually 100% dry by late April. The last pool to disappear was Pool 1, which for a brief period contained a huge (but inaccessible) concentration of shorebirds. After May 1 numbers of all birds at The Bottoms dropped off dramatically. Water finally began to flow into the refuge in late May and early June but by then most waterbirds were long gone and prospects for the nesting season were grim. An all-day trip though the area on June 10 by the Seltmans was a real experience in birdlessness. Even coots were rare! It was rather obvious that the breeding season had been irreversibly damaged by drought conditions. At Quivira NWR conditions were somewhat better with breeding birds very scarce but with most normal species present. Perhaps the biggest event of the season at Quivira was a prairie fire in April that burned about 5000 acres at the north end of the refuge. For a brief period good numbers of birds were found feeding in this burn but nothing rare was ever discovered.

On March 31 Charles Holthaus reported that a pair of Bald Eagles were occupying a nest in submerged trees at the west end of Clinton Reservoir. It was immediately confirmed that these birds were incubating eggs. Over the next several months many birders witnessed the hatching, feeding, and fledging of two young. One adult disappeared soon after hatching occurred but the remaining adult still managed to feed both juveniles. Kansas ornithologists had long predicted that Bald Eagles would someday begin nesting at our eastern reservoirs but would not have chosen Clinton as the most likely spot. This lake is not only very new, but because of its proximity to Lawrence is one of the more heavily visited lakes in the region. As soon as the nest was discovered Parks and Wildlife officials attempted to secure the area of the lake around the nest site with signs and barriers. This gesture was apparently successful in that the eagles ultimately fledged, but speedboats were often seen buzzing the nest site and one enterprising canoe-load of wildlife lovers were seen pounding on the nest tree with their paddles so they could get a better look at the sleeping eaglets. If the birds return next spring perhaps the novelty of nesting eagles will have worn off and they will be granted a little more privacy by the local citizenry.

Other birds of interest included breeding House Finches in both Topeka and Emporia with summering birds present in both Kansas City metro area and in several neighborhoods of Wichita. Can Lawrence and Baldwin be far behind? The sudden appearance of House Finches in eastern Kansas and western Missouri has created considerable controversy. While some analysts and American Birds commentators insist that birds found east of the Flint Hills originate from the eastern populations it is unclear why they have assigned sedentary status to birds in the western half of Kansas that have been marching eastward at the

rate of about 25 miles a year for the last decade while granting vast pioneering skills to birds from the East. It should be pointed out that on 1988 Christmas Bird Counts Missouri birders participating in 26 different counts found a total of 44 birds in their state (1.7 birds/count) with almost half of those coming from towns near the Kansas border (St. Joseph and Springfield). Meanwhile, 10 western Kansas counts tallied 616 House Finches (61.6 birds/count). This despite the fact that numbers of participants were very low and half of the counts contain no urban areas. While no one knows the total population of Kansas House Finches everyone who has birded in western towns knows that the number is very high, certainly many thousands of individuals. Judging from CBC's one must to go east all the way to Indiana to find comparable densities of House Finches to those currently in the western three-fifths of Kansas. It would appear that all Kansas cities (and even those in Central Missouri) are geographically closer to our finch factory than to any known concentration of House Finches east of the Mississippi River. It may well be that birds from the East are now arriving in Missouri and even eastern Kansas, but it seems that many people are seriously underestimating the ability of western House Finches to become airborne. Persons annoyed by this paragraph should call Chuck Ely or Marvin Rolfs in Hays. This team has banded over 8000 House Finches during the last decade. Perhaps you can convince them that all of these birds were local residents and never wandered east of Hays. Of course, in another ten years the entire East vs. West controversy will be just a dim memory as House Finches seem destined to occupy every county of every state in the Lower 48.

Several standouts among the birds reported from spring and summer include a Barrow's Goldeneye that stayed for a week or two in Topeka this April. This bird was seen by many area birders and its identity was confirmed by local experts. While there is still no specimen or even a photograph of this species in Kansas, the number of good sight records continues to mount. Black Rails were reported by several individuals at their normal haunts at the northwest edge of Quivira's Big Salt Marsh. The mosquito population was simply awesome there this summer. In addition to a good flashlight and wading boots, birders in the future should consider taking along a few units of blood.

The Little Gull found by Ted Cable at Tuttle Creek was probably the best bird of the season. It was present for about five days and was seen by quite a few Manhattan area birders. Kansas is averaging about 1 or 2 sightings of this gull per year. Otherwise, a few out-of-range warblers were seen across the state and there was a definite invasion of Cassin's Sparrows into the western counties. The spring migration had an unusual number of very early arrivals and very late departures, just a few of which are mentioned below. No doubt the early heat in April and the cold rainy weather in late May was the cause behind most of these anomalies.

The next reporting period covers the period from August through November 1989. We all should know by now that the fall season was incredibly exciting in the southwest with many rarities being recorded. I need a thorough report from each birder who visited southwest Kansas this fall including dates, places, and birds seen in order to write a full report on this phenomenal invasion in the next Horned Lark. Other than a certain family of raptors at Tuttle Creek it was quiet autumn in eastern Kansas, but perhaps you have just been holding out on us. I am still receiving reports from only a few ambitious souls. The next newsletter goes to press in February.

## BIRDING HIGHLIGHTS/ March through July 1989

Olivaceous Cormorant	1	LM,MM,BF	4-30-89	Coffey
Great Egret	1 early at Perry	DLS	<u>3-26-89</u>	Jefferson
Snowy Egret	1 in breeding plumage	DLS	6-18-89	Jefferson
Tundra Swan	1 remaining at MDC	LM	3-18-89	Linn
Trumpeter Swan	1 at MDC presumably	LM	3-18-89	Linn
	one of five Minnesota birds first found in February.			
Ross' Goose	1 at Melvern	LM,MM	3-25-89	Osage
Wood Duck	1 female with 7 downy young at Alma sewage ponds.	DLS	5-20-89	Wabaunsee
Cinnamon Teal	pair s. of Ogden	DLS	4-30-89	Riley
Greater Scaup	2 well seen males at Tuttle Creek St. Park sewage lagoons. Green gloss, rounded heads, and extended wing stripe all mentioned in report.	LJ	3-25-89	Riley
Lesser Scaup	pair at Perry	DLS	<u>5-27-89</u>	Jefferson
<u>Barrow's Goldeneye</u>	1 imm. male at sewage lagoons. Found by Dan Gish and confirmed by Gene Lewis and other area birders. Outside dates not reported.	DG,m.ob.	Apr. 89	Shawnee
Mississippi Kite	sev. very early locally	SS	4-27-89	Pawnee
Mississippi Kite	1 imm. over Manhattan	DR	7-26-89	Riley
Osprey	late straggler at Stockdale Cove seen repeatedly.	DR,LJ,RW	June 89	Riley
Bald Eagle	<u>pair nesting</u> at Clinton	CH	3-31-89	Douglas
	First modern nesting record for Kansas.			
Bald Eagle	2 imm. at Milford	DLS	<u>5-29-89</u>	Clay
Swainson's Hawk	<u>120</u> on ground in field	SS	4-25-89	Rush
Swainson's Hawk	<u>160</u> following tractor	SS	4-25-89	Pawnee
Golden Eagle	1	LM,MM	4-25-89	<u>Coffey</u>
Peregrine Falcon	1 well seen and well described adult seen at Stockdale area on west side of Tuttle Creek Res. June or July sightings very rare anywhere in Kansas.	LJ	<u>6-17-89</u>	Riley
Greater Prairie Chicken	1 in wheat nw. Larned	SS	4-23-89	Pawnee
	Very rare locally.			
Black Rail	1 calling at Quivira	PJ	7-01-89	Stafford
Sandhill Crane	2 w. of Big Salt Marsh	SC,RP	<u>5-07-89</u>	Stafford
Piping Plover	3 at Perry Res.	DLS	4-23-89	Jefferson
Piping Plover	5 at KW&P Headquarters	GB	5-03-89	Pratt
Piping Plover	1 at Quivira	SC,RP	5-06-89	Stafford
Piping Plover	1 at CB	SC,RP	5-06-89	Barton
Piping Plover	1 at Melvern Res.	SC,RP	5-07-89	Osage
Mountain Plover	3 at Big Salt Marsh	TC	4-22-89	Stafford
Mountain Plover	1 plover with deformed bill believed to be of this species reported from Clinton Res.	EL,JB	4-23-89	Douglas
Black-necked Stilt	2 at Perry Res.	DLS	5-24-89	<u>Jefferson</u>
Willet	1 roadkill	SP,SS	5-15-89	Stanton
Whimbrel	1 at Quivira	JZ,30+obs.	4-29-89	Stafford
Ruddy Turnstone	2 at n. end Tuttle	TC,MR,SS	5-20-89	Riley
White-rumped Sandpiper	1 remaining at Perry	DLS	6-18-89	Jefferson
Dunlin	3	TC,MR,SS	5-20-89	Riley
Short-billed Dowitcher	1 with other shorebirds at Nature Trail Area, Lake Afton.	PJ	4-17-89	Sedgwick
Short-billed Dowitcher	3 identified by call at Stockdale area.	LJ	5-13-89	Riley
Red-necked Phalarope	1 male at Perry Res.	DLS	5-27-89	Jefferson
<u>Little Gull</u>	1st winter bird along the dam at Tuttle Creek for about 5 days.	TC,m.ob.	5-15-89	Riley & Pott.
Common Tern	1 basic plumage Perry	DLS	6-03-89	Jefferson



























