

Kansas Ornithological Society

BULLETIN

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY

Vol. 31

September, 1980

No. 3

TREE SWALLOW NESTING COLONY AT MARAIS DES CYGNES WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

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Although the Tree Swallow (*Iridoprocne bicolor*) is an abundant spring and fall migrant through east and central Kansas, its status as a resident species has been considered uncommon. Johnston (1965) listed it as a local summer resident only from Doniphan County, while Tordoff (1956) listed it as a summer resident in extreme northeastern Kansas with nesting records from along the Missouri River in Doniphan County (four nests located by Linsdale in 1922, 1923, and 1924) and Leavenworth County, nests found by Brumwell along the Missouri River. In 1977 a nesting box placed in Pool No. 3 at Cheyenne Bottoms by Edmond Martinez and Marvin Schwilling attracted a pair of Tree Swallows which successfully reared a brood of young. Nesting at this location has not been repeated. Schwilling (per. comm.) also reported a single Tree Swallow nest in a Wood Duck box in Unit B, Marais des Cygnes Wildlife Management Area, circa 1961. Eugene Lewis (per. comm.) found a nesting pair of Tree Swallows (also in a Wood Duck box) in the same general area in 1976 or 1977. Apparently all of the above records involved nesting attempts by single pairs of Tree Swallows and while recent information has extended the breeding range in Kansas, the species normally remains an irregular and uncommon resident in the eastern half of the state. It appears of interest, therefore, to report the following observations of colonial nesting by Tree Swallows at the Marais des Cygnes Wildlife Management Area in 1979.

During a visit to this area on 26 May, 1979, I noticed several female Tree Swallows engaged in collecting dried grass along the roadside near the southeast corner of Unit A. After selecting bits of material, each bird was observed to fly toward a group of snags near the center of the pool, and although an accurate count could not be made, I saw as many as a dozen individuals flying about the snags at one time.

After receiving word of my observations, Marvin Schwilling made a visit to the site on 4 and 5 June, 1979, and provided additional information regarding the colony:

"Monday evening when I arrived about 6:15 p.m. one female was gathering nesting material from the water's edge just west of the restrooms along the south side of Unit A. It was a little windy for a canoe, and there was a thunder cloud in the west, but I put in anyway. I saw the first swallow enter a cavity even before I got into the snags. In all I jotted down 19 positive nests that evening and the next morning.

The wind went down overnight and Tuesday morning was a calm, pleasant morning so I took several pictures of three different nest sites with the swallows present.

Starlings were also nesting in the snags and occupied most of the woodpecker cavities that were in good condition. In fact I saw only one swallow nest in what appeared to be a good solid woodpecker cutting. Most were in cavities that were quite open, side cracks, open tops or large openings that probably

were too open or let in too much light for starlings to use. Great-blue Heron feathers were most common as nest lining and in many nests feathers were visible at the entrance. White feathers (mostly Great Egret) and Wood Duck feathers too were common as nest lining, making some very colorful nest cups.

Nesting apparently started early as one nest had fledged, apparently on June 5. Another young from a nest of three flew from the nest when my canoe bumped the nest snag. I saw only one nest with eggs and they appeared dark as though near hatching. Another nest with one 6-7 day old young had three spoiled eggs that I collected.

I feel quite certain there are at least 75 Tree Swallows nesting in Units A & G this spring and there may be more than 100."

We can only speculate as to the causative factors involved in this nesting phenomenon. Perhaps one or more pairs (though unobserved) have nested somewhere on the refuge every year. If so, the influence of these individuals on other Tree Swallows restrained from normal northward movement by the unseasonably cool spring may have stimulated the multiple nesting effort. Perhaps cavities in the snags have finally come to an optimum condition for the nesting requirements of the Tree Swallow. In any event it will be interesting to see if the colonial nesting effort is repeated in 1980.

LITERATURE CITED

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A Review of Curve-billed Thrasher Records from Kansas — The first Kansas record of Curve-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma curvirostre*) known to me was a sight record in Morton County by Richard and Jead Graber during their three and one-half months stay there in the spring of 1950. A collection was not made nor was the sight record published. Charles Ely and John Davis summarized Kansas Curve-billed Thrasher records through 1 January 1968 (1968. Kan. Ornith. Soc. Bull. 19:14-15). That report included a single bird which was seen by Ely and Maurice Witten at Castle Rock in Gove County on 21 April 1962 and a second bird which was seen on the same day in Ellis County on the Ft. Hays Kansas State College farm by Donald Darnell.

The first recorded specimen was taken by John A. Davis on 25 July 1963. This was an adult male taken 6½ miles west of Garden City in Finney County. On 10 November 1967, Gordon Barnhardt reported a single thrasher one half mile north of Winfield in Cowley County, and on 1 January 1968, Ely and Marvin Rolfs observed a single bird in Ellis County, three miles south of Antonino. This bird was collected the next day and proved to be an adult male.

The following is a compilation of additional records for this species through 1979:

The 1972 ten best birds of the year list that was compiled by Dr. Ivan Boyd lists a Curve-billed Thrasher, however, details are lacking.

A Curve-billed Thrasher came regularly to a feeder at the Marvin Rolfs residence in Hays, Ellis County from 8 December 1975 thru 4 April 1976. The bird was captured and banded on 16 March.

The 1975 Christmas Counts listed two single birds, Ellis County on 20 December and Morton County on 27 December.

On 2 November 1976 Al White and myself observed a single Curve-bill Thrasher southwest of Lakin on the Harry Brooks Ranch. A large, isolated cholla cactus held two nests that appeared to be of this species. A pair of thrashers had been identified at this site about two years previously by Keith Baird. I returned to this area on 14 April 1977 and observed a pair of Curve-billed Thrashers adding the finishing touches to a nest in the cholla.

The 1977 Christmas Count lists a single bird from Elkhart, Morton County on 30 December 1977.

On 12 April 1978 Al White and myself observed two thrashers and a nearly completed nest in a large cholla 8 miles north and 3 miles east of Elkhart in Morton County.

On 17 and 18 June 1978 Mark Ports, Dr. Charles Ely and his field biology class observed two birds at a weed-filled corral 8 miles north and 3¼ miles west of Elkhart, Morton County.

On 24 June 1978 Mark Ports found an active nest with one egg 8 miles north and 3½ miles east of Rolla, Morton County. Al White photographed the nest that evening. Al White and Lawrence Smith returned to the nest on 29 June 1978 and found the nest still containing one added egg. This nest was no longer being used, and the thrashers were constructing a new nest in the same cholla. At the same time three juvenile thrashers were being fed by the adults. The added egg was collected and now is in my possession.

On 19 July 1978 Mark Ports observed a fledged juvenile thrasher 6 miles north and 1 mile west of Elkhart, Morton County.

A phone call from Al White reported an apparent old thrasher nest (March 1979) in Hamilton County southeast of Syracuse in a large cholla cactus.

On 4 June 1979 Mark Ports observed two adults feeding three young in a nest 8½ miles north and 3½ miles east of Rolla, Morton County.

On 14 June 1979 I observed a single Curve-billed Thrasher at a clump of four large cholla cactus 3¾ miles north of Montezuma in Gray County. A nearly completed nest was in one of the chollas.

On 26 June 1979 Mark Ports observed a pair of thrashers constructing a nest 8 miles north and 2½ miles east of Rolla, Morton County. A second nest observed this date 8½ miles north and 3½ miles east of Rolla contained two eggs.

To date there have now been at least 30 sightings in addition to 6 nesting records from Gray, Hamilton and Morton Counties. There are two specimens in museum collections and a single egg in my personal collection.

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Ambush-like Predation by a Blue Jay on Fledgling House Sparrows. — On 29 May 1979 I was observing the fledging of a brood of House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) from a compartment of a Purple Martin house at the Tom Church residence in Baldwin City, Kansas. Several broods were near fledging and individuals would come out on the ledges in front of the compartment doors to beg food and exercise their wings. As I watched, a Blue Jay (*Cyanositta cristata*) flew into a Pin Oak tree just across the alley, about 30 feet from the martin house. A short time later a fledgling House Sparrow flew from the martin house (about 15 feet in the air) in a descending path to the bottom branches of the oak tree (about 6 feet from the ground). Immediately the Blue Jay pounced on the fledgling sparrow, pinned it to a branch with its feet, and pecked it sharply about the head until it quit struggling. The Blue Jay then proceeded to tear at the breast of the sparrow and eat it. The jay was absorbed enough in this activity that it allowed me to approach within a few feet and observe an aluminum band on its right leg with the numbers upside down. I had no time to get my binoculars to read the digits before the Blue Jay picked up its unfinished meal and flew laboriously out of sight.

Two days later about noon as I returned to the vicinity of the martin house, another fledgling House Sparrow flew down to the same oak tree. I heard it squealing and upon closer inspection found it struggling in the bill of a Blue Jay. With binoculars I could easily see a band on the jay's right leg with the numbers upside down. Although there are several banded Blue Jays in the neighborhood, it would seem highly unlikely that more than one Blue Jay, banded in the described manner, would lie in wait for fledgling sparrows in this particular tree. I at-

tempted to photograph the occurrence but by then the Blue Jay had killed the sparrow, eaten part of it and flew off with the remainder.

Blue Jays are of course infamous predators on eggs and nestlings of other species of birds (Bent, A. C. 1947. Bull. U.S. Nat. Mus. No. 191). However, most instances of Blue Jay predation on nestlings involve altricial young that are quite small and weak. A fledgling House Sparrow is fairly large, weighing approximately 23 grams (compared to an adult weight of about 104 grams for a Blue Jay), and puts up quite a struggle. The advantages of such a large morsel of food must surely be weighed against the chances of injury while attempting to prey on it. There are a few accounts of Blue Jay predation on prey larger than nestlings. Prescott (1963. Wilson Bull. 75:459) has recorded an instance of attempted predation on a fledgling Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) and Master (1979. Wilson Bull. 91:470) reported the unusual predation upon an adult House Sparrow that was dust bathing. This is the first time in many years of observations of House Sparrow biology that I've seen Blue Jays preying on House Sparrows.

An interesting aspect of these events is the unique predatory behavior of the Blue Jay. Instead of attacking the fledgling in the air or on open ground where the sparrow had a chance to escape, or at the martin house where the Blue Jay risked attack from adult sparrow, it lay in wait to surprise and trap the fledgling before it could react. That the Blue Jay employed this tactic twice indicates that it was no chance occurrence. The oak tree is one of three trees that fledgling sparrows flew to on leaving the nest and the oak was not the closest. However, the Blue Jay may have preferred it because it offered concealment from the sparrows. It possibly frequented all the trees that fledglings used as first landing areas on a regular basis in anticipation of a meal. That it was the oak on both occasions that I observed predation may have been coincidence. How long the Blue Jay had practiced his skill before I first observed it, how many times it was used subsequently at this or other locations, and the frequency of occurrence of this type of predation in other Blue Jays are interesting to speculate on.

My thanks to Roger L. Boyd for his comments on the manuscript.

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New Distributional Records for the State of Kansas. — A trip to Morton County 16-19 May 1978 provided some new records for Morton County and two new state records, one a breeding record and the other a new species for the state list. The records are as follows:

Broad-tailed Hummingbird, *Selasphorus platycercus*. — A male of this species was seen feeding in a grove of black locust, *Robinia pseudoacacia*, on the morning of 18 May 1978, 15 mi. N, 6 mi. W. Elkhart, Morton County, Kansas. The bird was collected (SC 2803) and was an adult male with small testes, weighed 3.7 gm and had heavy fat. This species has been reported by word of mouth in the state but no specimen records or other substantiated records are available until this time. Another adult male was observed on 13-14 August 1979, 1 mi. N, Oxford, Sumner County, Kansas. The bird was first observed by Wallace Champeny and later by myself and numerous other birders. The bird was feeding at a feeder and also in cannas. The bird made the characteristic sound of the Broad-tailed Hummingbird male.

The range of this species is normally eastern Colorado and westward in the United States and south into Mexico.

Cerulean Warbler, *Dendroica cerulea*. — A male was observed by Marvin Schwillig feeding in the same black locust as the forementioned species, 15 mi. N, 6 mi. W. Elkhart, Morton County, Kansas, on 18 May 1978. This is the farthest west record for the state and the first for Morton County.

Brewer's Sparrow, *Spizella breweri*. — On 17 May 1978, this species was found breeding 5¼ mi. N, 9½ mi. E. Elkhart, Morton County, Kansas. We had visited the

area about 1 p.m. and found the sparrows fairly common in the sagebrush, *Artemisia filifolia*. Males were singing and chasing females. Two specimens were collected and proved to both be females. One bird (SC 2794) was laying eggs. She had three collapsed follicles and one ovum in the oviduct. Her brood patch was just beginning to show. The other specimen (SC 2795) was also a female but had no collapsed follicles but three enlarged ova, one to 5 mm and just about to erupt. On 19 May, Schwilling and White returned to the area and searched until a nest with four eggs was found and collected.

Although this species has been recorded breeding in Oklahoma, this is the first breeding record for the State of Kansas.

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