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Records of the Yellow Rail In Kansas

by

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While doing a controlled burn in mid-April 1992, Don George, a Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks fisheries biologist, Rod Bollinger, a Natural Resources Conservation Service technician, and Swan observed 50-100 rails flushing from the unburned tall grass. The burn was located at N1/2, SE1/4, Sec. 16, Twp. 21S, R25E, in Linn County. The burn was conducted on conservation reserve program (CRP) land that had been seeded to a mixture of tall, dense native grass species including indian-grass (*Sorghastrum avenaceum*), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardi*), little bluestem (*Andropogon scoparius*), switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), and side-oats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*). The stand was tall and dense. The soil was saturated with moisture and had some standing water.



Figure 1 – Yellow Rail Photograph taken by Tom Swan.

We observed at least two species of rails flushing as the fire approached. Many of the rails appeared to be so small and such weak flyers, they almost looked like young of the year. Coloration seemed different from the larger, stronger flying rails. We captured one bird by chasing it down after several flights. We identified it only as a rail and released the bird unharmed.

On 16 April 1997, we once again conducted a controlled burn on the SE1/4, SW1/4, Sec. 20, Twp. 21S, R25E, in Linn County. Again the grass was tall, dense, native CRP land. While we were burning, we observed several rails flushing as described in the above burn. One rail flew into woodland and hit a limb, stunning itself. We picked it up and using a bird book, identified it as a Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) (Fig. 1). In flight the white in the speculum was conspicuous and we noticed it on all the other birds that day. After this second experience, we assume that the majority of the rails seen in 1992 were also Yellow Rails.

Both of the above mentioned CRP fields were very close to or surrounded by timber. The first was about one mile from the Marais des Cygnes river, but in an upland situation. This land is now part of the recently established Marais des Cygnes National Wildlife Refuge. The 1997 site is located on top of a hill with timber all around.

Thompson and Ely (1989) list this rail as a rare and probably overlooked migrant with specimen and sight records from Barton, Douglas, McPherson, Osage, Riley, Sedgwick, and Wabaunsee counties. Many of the records are from the WIBW-TV tower in Shawnee County. The Wabaunsee County records are from the WIBW-TV tower and due to the tower sitting on the county line, were erroneously listed as Wabaunsee County and this should be corrected to read Shawnee County. While previous sight and specimen records might indicate this bird to be rare in Kansas, kills at the WIBW-TV tower, about ten miles west of Topeka, Shawnee County, and the present records suggest otherwise. Previous Kansas spring records are few. Most of the specimens from Kansas are in The University of Kansas Museum of Natural History collections. The earliest specimen record that we know of was taken in Douglas County on 18 April 1885 (KU 6901). No collector was listed. The next Kansas specimen also a female (KU 6903) was collected by an unknown person on 1 October 1885. The species remained absent from the record until W. S. Long collected a specimen (KU 20411) at Clearwater, Sedgwick County, on 21 October 1933. Again a long period of time passed until 13 September 1970, when a large number of birds struck the WIBW-TV tower. Among the tower kills was a Yellow Rail, now in the Southwestern College collections (SC 2526). This specimen was not reported by Ball et al (1995). This same tower knocked down two more rails on 25 September 1985 when two birds (KU 81806-807) were picked up. This locality produced again on 11 October 1986 when 34 Yellow Rails were picked up dead at the tower. Twenty-four of these birds are in the University of Kansas collections (KU 82998-99, 83001, 83003, 83007-10, 83050-54, 85835, 85863, 85908, 85969, 86360, 86406, 87816-17, 87837). At least ten specimens are

unaccounted for and were probably exchanged with other institutions. On 8 October 1994, another five Yellow Rails were picked up at the tower by University of Kansas personnel (Ball et al, 1995) and are deposited in the University of Kansas collections (86362-65, 87826).

Thompson and Ely (1989) suggested searching for the species in marshy areas, but the present data seems to indicate that perhaps damp, upland grasslands maybe more appropriate. Ripley (1977) does state that Yellow Rails forage in the drier parts of large grass and sedge growing in freshwater marshes.

Literature Cited

- Ball, Lisa G., Kristof Zyskowski, and Griselda Escalona-Segura. 1995. Recent bird mortality at a Topeka television tower. *Kansas Orni. Soc. Bull.* 46:33-36.
- Ripley, S. Dillon. 1977. *Rails of the world.* David R. Godine, Boston. xx+406 pp.
- Thompson, Max C. and Charles A. Ely. 1989. *Birds in Kansas.* Public Education Series No. 11, Univ. Kansas Mus. Nat. Hist., 404 pp.

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Rufous Hummingbird in Meade County, Kansas – On 16 May, 1997, an adult male Rufous Hummingbird was observed briefly in Meade, Meade County, Kansas. The bird was observed at 0650 at a distance of 5 feet. The bird was attracted to the red foil covering of a discarded flower pot and hovered briefly investigating the foil and then flew out of view. Although only seen briefly, the rust-colored breast and back were clearly visible, separating this bird from any other possible species. Although a hummingbird feeder was nearby, the bird was never observed using it.

This represents the only published spring record of the Rufous Hummingbird in either Oklahoma or Kansas, and is the only spring record for southwestern Kansas. There are only 12 counties in Kansas with published records and no published records exist for Meade County.

The Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) is considered by Thompson and Ely (1989. Thompson, Max C. and Charles Ely. *Birds In Kansas*, Univ. Kansas Mus. Nat. Hist Publ. Educ. Series No. 11.) as a "rare fall transient" from 21 July to 4 October. Sutton (1974. Sutton, George M. *A Check-List of Oklahoma Birds.* Stovall Mus. Sci. and Hist. Univ. Oklahoma. 48 pp) lists several records from 10 August through 1 September, for Cimarron County, Oklahoma and a "summer" 1956 record for Texas County, Oklahoma in the Oklahoma Panhandle.

Grzybowski (1986. Grzybowski, Joseph A. *Date Guide To The Occurrences Of Birds In Oklahoma.* Oklahoma Orni. Soc. 30 pp) lists the Rufous Hummingbird as "Rare" in most regions of Oklahoma with an accepted date range of 22 July through 20 November. *Thomas L. Flowers; P.O. Box 87; Meade, Kansas 67864-0087*

Bird Sightings in Thomas County, Kansas – Some species of birds have not been reported as being observed in Thomas County, as noted in the Birds in Kansas (Thompson, Max C. and Charles A. Ely. 1989 Vol. 1 and 1992 Vol. 2, Univ. Kansas Mus. Nat. Hist. Pub. Educ. Series 11 and 12). The following is a list of new records for Thomas County except as noted.

Eared Grebe – Injured bird found in Colby, May 1992.

Double-crested Cormorant – Single bird observed summer 1995, Villa High Lake, Colby, by Sharon Steele.

Little Blue Heron – A flock of 15 juveniles observed at Logan County State Lake, Russell Springs, April or May 1983.

Cattle Egret – Irregular visitor to Colby, in spring and summer. Small flocks observed in 1989 and 1994.

Green Heron – Dead juvenile found summer 1990 near Villa High Lake, Colby, by Sharon Steele.

Black-crowned Night-Heron – One bird observed near Prairie Dog Creek, Colby, April 1993 and another on 20 April 1994, by Jack Kriss.

Canada Goose – A regular visitor during migration.

Osprey – Casual to vagrant during migration. First recorded on 15 October 1976.

Mississippi Kite – Casual visitor and possible nesting species. Both juvenile and adults are infrequently observed. During spring 1994, an adult pair were observed mating and carrying sticks.

Sharp-shinned Hawk – Regular visitor to bird feeders. A pair nested on 5 May 1997 in Colby, where the female was observed incubating.

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[to be continued in Volume 48 (4).]



Figure—Northern Saw-whet Owl located by Sara Shane in a small cedar on the Scott Lake Christmas Count at Scott Lake State Park. *Photo by Tom Shane, 1 January 1997.*