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The Cedar Waxwing: A Western Kansas Breeding Species.

By

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The Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) was classified as a rare, local, and highly irregular summer resident in northeastern Kansas (Johnston 1964). In Ellis County, the species was listed as a common migrant and uncommon winter resident (Ely 1971). In western Kansas, small flocks were occasionally seen in June, especially along the Arkansas River (Rising 1974). In Meade County, the waxwing has been recorded as late as 31 May; however, no summer records exist (Flowers 1995). No confirmed nesting records were reported for the species from western Kansas (Thompson and Ely 1992).

We surveyed nesting birds at Scott State Park, Scott County, Kansas from 9 March through 6 July 1986. A forty-two stop census was made around the state park and wildlife area along with a few stops on adjoining private property. Cedar Waxwings were observed at least once on 9 of the 42 stops from 17 May through 6 July. Five of the observations during May were of flocks from 6 to 20 birds, with single birds observed on three occasions. Many of these birds may still have been migrants. All five observations during June included one or two birds except for a group of six on 28 June. Individual birds were observed on 4 and 5 July at different locations. Adult birds were often seen eating the berries of the golden currant (*Ribes odoratum*), a fairly abundant food source in the side canyons of the park.

While counting birds on 6 July 1986 on the east shore of Scott Lake (just west of the chapel at Camp Lakeside) in the vicinity of a small grove of large cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*), we observed a recently fledged Cedar Waxwing perched on the edge of a trash barrel (Photo 1). The young bird occasionally gave a call that was similar to the typical call of an adult. We approached within 30 feet, taking several photographs. After a closer approach the small waxwing, which had only about one-third of its rectrices emerging, made a laborious flight about 20 feet up into one of the cottonwoods. A second fledgling was observed in the cottonwood.



Photo 1. — Fledgling Cedar Waxwing 6 July 1986 Scott State Park, Scott County, Kansas. Photo by Sara Shane

Eight additional records of breeding have also been observed in the west half of

Kansas, which includes the counties west of and including the tier from Smith to Barber. In the western neighborhoods of Elkhart, Morton County, 19 September 1992, Seltman observed ten very young birds of various ages (ranging from some with short tails and yellow beaks to birds with fully grown tails, etc., all heavily streaked on the breast), with ten adults (Cable et al. 1996). In northeast Smith County, 17 June 1995, Rader found a nest with young on the Cora Atlas Block (Kansas Breeding Bird Atlas [KBBAT] unpub. data). A fledgling was observed 23 September 1995 in Leoti, Wichita County by Seltman. On 21 September 1996, Seltman and Rader observed an adult with four juveniles at the "Boy Scout" area (5 miles ENE of K-27 Highway) along the Cimarron River, Morton County. In Norton County, at the Lenora Lake in the Lenora Special KBBAT Block on 16 June 1997, Seltman observed at least five fledglings all with short tails, yellow bills and several with down on heads. There were over thirty Cedar Waxwings in the immediate vicinity including the fledglings (Mike Rader and Scott Seltman pers. comms.).

In Morton County, at the "Middle Spring" (1.75 miles WSW of K-27 Highway and the Cimarron River Bridge) on 12 September 1998, an adult Cedar Waxwing was observed feeding a juvenile. When the adult was away the juvenile would call and beg (Sebastian Patti pers. comm.). At mid-afternoon 27 September 1998, the authors observed a fledgling Cedar Waxwing perched on a short post near the lake shore at the same location they had observed the fledglings in 1986 at Scott State Park, Scott County. The rectrices were fully emerged on this bird. Four American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) were foraging on a mud bar next to the water five to ten feet from the fledgling waxwing. A short time after we located the young waxwing it flew down to one of the robins and begged with open bill. The robin moved away and then an adult waxwing flew down from a tree and landed next to the fledgling. Within five to six seconds both waxwings flew east from the mud bar and up into a cottonwood. In Russell County, Cedar Waxwings were observed flying into the red cedar trees (*Juniperus virginiana*) behind the Wilson State Park permit office from mid-July to early August, 2000. Begging calls were often heard when adults entered the trees during this period (Mike Rader pers. comm.).

With an average of four eggs per clutch, a 12-day incubation period and 15.5 days to fledge (Witmer et al. 1997), it is estimated that the initial egg laying dates began for several of the above observations on 13 May 1997 [Norton Co.], 23 May 1995 [Smith Co.], 2 June 1986 [Scott Co.], 1 August 1998 [Morton Co.], and 12 August 1992 [Morton Co.]. The Kansas May dates precede the earliest normal dates by several weeks for the species throughout its entire range (Ibid).

Two nests of Cedar Waxwing were found 31 May 1985 near the Rock Creek Hatchery and adjacent lake in Dundy County, Nebraska, the first for the southwestern region of that state (Mollhoff 1985). Mollhoff hypothesizes that the birds seek a lake or marsh area with trees for breeding in southwest Nebraska, which seems to be supported by many of the recent records in Kansas listed above. Prior to 1990 only three probable records existed for the plains of eastern Colorado (Andrews and Righter 1992). Recently, on the eastern plains, a confirmed record occurred in southeastern Las Animas County and a probable record was reported in eastern Elbert County (Barrett 1998). Three old records of waxwing nests (1914-1921) were reported for the Panhandle of Oklahoma (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992). No nests or fledglings have been observed in the Texas Panhandle; however, a few full-feathered juveniles have been recorded (Ken Seyffert pers. comm.).

Populations of the Cedar Waxwing have steadily increased from 1966, the beginning year for the Breeding Bird Survey, through 1999 (Sauer et al. 2000). Those states along the southern edge of the breeding range, i.e. Illinois with the best "Regional Credibility Measures" (12.2 % per year), Kansas (12.3 %), Missouri (18.7 %), and Nebraska (21.1 %) have had the greatest increase in population growth of all the states in the Cedar Waxwing breeding range.

With the lack of range fires and the expansion of various berry plant populations such as the golden currant and red cedar in canyons and river bottoms of

western Kansas, the nesting frequency of the Cedar Waxwing should continue to increase beyond the six counties now reported.

We thank Thomas L. Flowers, Dan L. LaShelle, Mike Rader and Scott Seltman for reading early drafts of this note. Also William H. Busby and Craig C. Freeman of the Kansas Biological Survey for sharing the results of the Kansas Breeding Bird Atlas Project for the Cedar Waxwing and assistance in plant taxonomy. We appreciate Sebastian Patti, Mike Rader, Scott Seltman, and Ken Seyffert for allowing us access to their unpublished data.

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In Memoriam

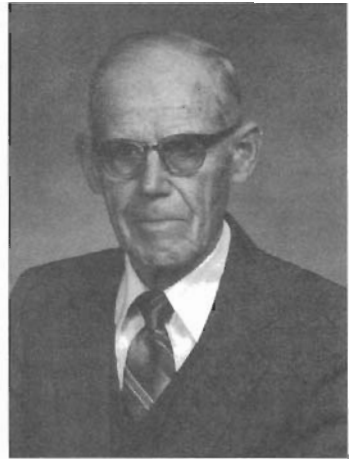
Richard H. Schmidt (1909-2000)

Gregg Friesen

Richard H. Schmidt, a charter member of the Kansas Ornithological Society and a retired member of the Emporia State University faculty, died Friday, May 19, 2000 in Newton, Kansas. He was born in Goessel, KS on January 26, 1909. Richard's first wife, Tina Bergen Schmidt, preceded him in death. In 1990 Richard married Ruth Woelk. She survives along with two sons, Richard of Kansas City, MO, and Donald of Lanham, MD, and three daughters, Frances Schrag of Newton, Elizabeth Duerksen of Golden, CO, and Kathryn Mathews of Austin, TX. A daughter, Glenda

van Sickle preceded him in death.

Richard's story, especially his love for wildlife, is quite an inspiring story. I long ago remember someone in my home town mentioning that our neighbor had a brother who taught on the faculty of Emporia State Teacher's College with only a high school diploma on his education record. I was also familiar with a large number of mounted bird specimens Richard prepared for a museum near my home. Despite this, it wasn't until 1987 that I first met Richard during a Christmas Bird Count. What I remember about the count was an incident involving a Townsend's Solitaire. On a cold and drizzly day, the bird sat motionless for 5 minutes not more than 10 feet from us. With Richard beside me, I named the species and proceeded to mark the bird on the list. This wasn't good enough for Richard. Prior to recording what to me was an obvious bird, Richard wanted me to confirm it by naming field marks. I complied. This, in a sense, is an important component in the story of Richard Schmidt. He had a passion and a drive for perfection in his work; a drive that not only was the basis of his work but also worked to inspire others to an equally high standard.



Richard's Schmidt's life did not take the paths one normally takes to end up teaching in a university. Growing up in the small Marion County town of Goessel, Richard early in life developed an interest in the outdoors. This led, at the age of 14, to an interest in taxidermy. Eventually he apprenticed in the art of taxidermy under a local high school principal. After high school Richard farmed in the Goessel community all the while continuing with his interest in the outdoors and in taxidermy. His interest and drive for perfection served him well. In 1956, well established as a taxidermist, Richard was invited to join the faculty of Emporia State Teachers College as a full-time staff taxidermist. He remained at this post until his retirement in 1976. His work currently fills both the Maurice Yoder Memorial Museum at Hesston College and the Schmidt Natural History Museum at Emporia State University among other museums. His work as a taxidermist, over the years, has taken him as far north as the arctic and as far south as Columbia where he helped train a taxidermist and establish a museum.

In the early 1990's I had the opportunity to bird over a noon hour with one of Richard's nephews, Melvin Schmidt. Melvin spoke to another side of Richard's experience that few out of the birding community fully understand. Melvin noted that while farming, Richard kept, at all times, a vehicle on the farm with birding, collecting, and camping supplies ready to go after good birds. When he was in the field plowing, if a good bird presented, Richard would often leave the plow standing in the field and begin the chase to better see (and I'm sure, at times, collect) the bird. Melvin related the story of Richard once chasing a Bald Eagle from his farm near Goessel to near Lawrence. While those reading this article my fully understand this focus, small-town farmers and business people thought it odd at best. Part of the wonder of Richard's life comes from the fact that he didn't let this attitude deter him from either his passion for the outdoors or his connection to his home community. In fact, throughout his life, despite being different in many ways from those with whom he lived, he maintained close ties to and a keen interest in the history of the Goessel community. Through the years Richard freely shared his interests in the outdoors with anyone who would listen; finding audiences in boy scout troops, schools, and even, in one account, a German prisoner of war camp at Peabody during World War II.

My last birding trip with Richard was several years ago. Again, on a Christmas

Bird Count, he joined us for a half a day. On this trip he chose to nap in the car when we walked even moderate distances. Our returns to the vehicle were met with his questions on sightings and, inevitably, some probing questions as to the accuracy of those sightings. He relished thorough reports and gave a skeptical vocal admonition to less convincing records.

Those who met Richard Schmidt could not help but remember him. Those who spent time with him in the field or worked along side him could not help but be affected by his drive for accurate and quality work. He leaves a legacy both in his work and in his relationships with a large number of naturalists within the state. I will long remember him and am a better birder because of him.

515 East Fourth, Newton, KS 67114-3531

American Robin re-uses nest site – In spring 1999 a female American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) nested in a 4 m tall Amur Maple (*Acer ginnala*) tree adjacent to the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks office building in a suburban neighborhood of Emporia, Lyon County. We are uncertain with the outcome of the nest, but in late fall the nest cup had fallen and was on the ground beneath the tree. By spring 2000, nest was deteriorated so that only a small amount of grass remained of the original nest cup.

In late April 2000, we noticed that a nest was being constructed in this same tree and in the same location as the previous year's nest. On 9 May, an adult robin was sitting in the fully formed nest cup. On 11 May there were 3 eggs in the nest and on 15 May three nestlings. On 25 May the nestlings were gone from the nest but a male was still nearby and making warning vocalizations to the nestlings that were presumably hidden on the ground. On 31 May one nestling was found dead beneath the nest tree.

The following are physical characteristics of the nest site made on 1 June 2000: height above ground–1.2 m, light in mid-afternoon on a clear day (measured with an Extech Model 40125 digital electronic light meter)–(inside nest) 2,040 Lux,(outside nest tree) 99,875 Lux, temperature–(inside nest) 34.4C, (outside nest) 35.0C, distance from edge of parking lot– 10.4 m, distance from office building–24.4 m. The single Amur Maple containing the nests were built in is on the north end of a planting consisting of sumac (*Rhus* sp.), and juniper (*Juniperus* sp.). The planting is on a berm that is 1.5 m above the level of the adjacent parking lot. Distances to nearest alternate nesting cover is 30.5 to 182.9 m. The nest site is also 13.7 m from a creek and 27.4 m from a highway.

Although certain artificial structures such as nesting shelves, eaves or soffits may be reused year after year, we are unaware of any documented instances of nest site re-use by robins on natural structures.

Roger D. Applegate, Kyle Van Why, and Brian E. Flock, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, P. O. Box 1525, Emporia, KS 66801-1525.

Bald Eagle Nestling Ensnared By Devil's Claw – Bald Eagles, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, were first documented nesting in Kansas in 1989 (Schwilling, M.D., D.W. Mulhern, and G. Horak. 1989. The Bald Eagle nesting in Kansas. Kansas Ornith. Soc. Bull. 40:35-36.), and have been annual breeders in the state since that time. Beginning in eastern Kansas, the breeding population has expanded to several sites, with the western-most location at Keith Sebelius Reservoir, in Norton County. A pair began nesting at Sebelius Reservoir in 1997 (Watkins, M.A. and D.W. Mulhern. 1999. Ten years of successful Bald Eagle nesting in

Kansas. Kansas Ornith. Soc. Bull. 50:29-33.), using a dead tree inundated by the impoundment for their first two years, then moving to a live tree on land 820 meters downstream from the dam the past two years. This pair produced two young per year in 1997 and 1998, three young per year in 1999 and 2000. The nest tree was climbed and the nestlings banded in 1999 and 2000.

On April 26, 2000, 44 days after first evidence of hatching, the nest tree was climbed and each chick was measured, weighed and banded. Prior to this, a local observer had remarked that one nestling had a deformed right wing which appeared to be no more than half the length of the left. Therefore, we carefully inspected the wings of each bird handled. The second bird brought down from the nest was unable to fully extend its right wing, which was restricted to the bird's torso by a very thin stick-like object. At first we guessed this may have been a thin bone from some prey item. By following this object with our fingers we could feel it passing very close to the bird's body, crossing both front and back of the body beneath the feathers. We subsequently identified the object as a seed pod of a devil's claw, *Proboscidea louisianica*. Barkley (Barkley, T.M. 1983. Field guide to the common weeds of Kansas. Univ. Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, pp. 98-99.) describes the devil's claw fruit as "a capsule, 8-20 cm long and 3 cm thick, with a long, curved beak that separates at maturity into 2 woody, recurved claws." He reports it from all counties in the western half of Kansas, and numerous scattered counties in the east. The capsule portion of the devil's claw on this eaglet was 7-8 cm in length, and the claws were approximately 16 cm in additional length, including the recurved portion of the claw.

The hook at the end of the claw that was partially visible was imbedded in the flesh of the right wing at a point near where the 7th and 8th secondaries arise. This claw then passed in front of the bird, immediately beneath the sternum and tight against the body. The capsule rested against the bird's left side, and the other claw passed diagonally up and across the bird's back, its hook imbedded in the flesh of the right shoulder. As a result, the eaglet could extend its right wing only 6-7 cm from its side.

We used a scissors to snip the ends from each claw, so the hooks could more easily be removed from the flesh. Neither wound was deep or appeared to be infected. We cleaned each of minor debris and, after completing our measuring and banding (purple color band engraved with silver 3 over U on right leg), returned the eaglet to the nest along with its two siblings. No wing feathers were broken, but two or three of the secondaries were bent and slightly misshapen.

It is not known how the devil's claw came to be in an eagle nest more than 15 m off the ground. It possibly was carried by one of the adults along with herbaceous or grassy nesting material, which is used to line the nest cup prior to egg-laying. A Florida Power and Light Company web site on Bald Eagles (Florida Power and Light Company. 2000. Florida's endangered species; Bald Eagle booklet. http://www.spl.com/html/kid_eaglebook.html), states that their impulse to pick up objects and take them to the nest is strong, and eagles continue to do this for several weeks after finishing their nest. This can result in odd things being brought to the nest, including miscellaneous household and yard items. Stalmaster (Stalmaster, M.V. 1987. The Bald Eagle. Universe Books, New York, NY.) reports that such items may serve as "advertisement" or warning to other eagles that the nest and territory are occupied. An eagle nest at Wolf Creek Cooling Lake in Coffey County, Kansas, was once found to contain a softball-sized piece of dried cow manure (US Fish and Wildlife Service, unpublished data).

We presume the eaglet became entangled in the seed capsule when it was small, and simply grew into it until it became more restricted. The seed capsule was split down the middle and the two halves were opened nearly perpendicular to the stem, suggesting a wedging effect of the eaglet's growing body between the two claws. Unless the bird could get its bill on and break the 6 cm or so of the claw which it could reach, it is unlikely it could have freed itself. This would have precluded it

ever fledging, and it probably would have died in the nest. However, on May 22, 2000, all three eaglets were seen in a tree approximately 50 m from the nest tree, and each was seen in flight at various times after that date.

Acknowledgments

We thank William Bussen for his help in monitoring eagle activity at this nest, and Bruce and James Winder for their climbing expertise which allowed this banding to occur. We also gratefully acknowledge Ted Cable and Mike Watkins for reviewing this manuscript.

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Daniel W. Mulhern, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 315 Houston Street, Suite E, Manhattan, KS, 66502; R. Lance Hedges, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, P.O. Box 431, Norton, Kansas, 67654; Anthony K. Ifland, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, RR 1, Box 103, Kirwin, Kansas, 67644.

Racer as a Winter Prey Item of Red-tailed Hawk – While driving east 19 December 1999 about 14:50 on the south Arkansas River road 5 miles west of Syracuse, Hamilton County, Kansas during the Syracuse Winter Bird Count, Edwards spotted an adult Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) flying northeast across the road with a large snake in its talons. The hawk was flying fairly low (20 ft.) off the ground from an agricultural field, landing in a stand of medium-sized cottonwood trees (*Populus deltoides*) in a riparian zone of vegetation comprised of medium to small cottonwoods, grasses, and numerous dense stands of the exotic, salt cedar (*Tamarix ramosissima*).

When we pulled up adjacent to the trees, the hawk departed with the snake wnw. and landed again about 100 yards away in a mid-sized cottonwood about 60 yards from the road. We examined the snake with a spotting scope; however, we were not able to see enough details for an identification. Shane walked through a heavy stand of salt cedar toward the cottonwood, causing the hawk to take flight again. This time the hawk left the snake draped over a fairly large horizontal limb. The snake had a bright yellow to yellow-orange belly, and an olive green back with no markings. From our description of the snake, it was determined to be an Eastern Yellowbelly Racer (*Coluber constrictor flaviventris*), a common reptile of Kansas (Stan Roth pers. comm.). The head had been removed and about two inches of the vertebral column protruded anterior to the snake's main body, which was still in the 36-40 inch length range. After the hawk had departed, the snake's muscular contractions would raise and lower the tail to and from the tree limb.

While Shane was returning to the road, the original Red-tailed Hawk, along with a second, and a Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonica*) returned to the tree. The temperature had reached 38 degrees Fahrenheit with a strong 20 mile per hour nw. wind. The previous day's temperatures also ranged from 31-42 degrees. By the time we departed the area, three Red-tailed Hawks had gathered (some soaring) in the vicinity of the tree containing the snake.

Adult racers are diurnal and range in size from 23 - 50 inches. They are normally active from April to mid-November at temperatures from 60 - 90 degrees Fahrenheit. In Ford County, racers have been found in winter retreats below ground by 20 November (Collins, J. T. 1993. *Amphibians and reptiles in Kansas*. 3rd. edition revised. The University of Kansas. Natural History Museum.). In Finney County, the racer is found more commonly on the flood plain of the Arkansas River than in the adjoining sandhills (Choate, J. R., C. A. Ely, E. D. Fleharty, and G. K. Hulett. 1981. *Biological inventory of the sandsage prairie near Holcomb, Kansas*. Final report prepared for Sunflower Electric Cooperative, Inc. Dept. of Biological Sci. Fort Hays St. Univ. Hays, Kansas.). In a typical High Plains setting, the racer accounts for almost 17% of all snakes and is the second most common species. On the Cimarron National Grasslands in Morton County, the racer accounts for only 5.3% of the entire snake population with six species more abundant (Fitch, H. S. 1993. *Relative abundance of snakes in Kansas*. *Trans. Kans. Acad. Sci.* 96: 213-224). In eastern Kansas, the racer accounts for 2% of the Red-tailed Hawk's prey items during the summer (Fitch, H. S. and R. O. Bare. 1978. *A field study of the Red-tailed Hawk in eastern Kansas*. *Trans. Kans. Acad. Sci.* 81: 1-13). In different regions of the Red-tailed Hawk range, snakes can account for none to 50% of the diet (Preston, C. R. and R. D. Beane. 1993. *Red-tailed Hawk (Buteo jamaicensis)*. *In The Birds of North America*, No. 52 (A. Poole and F. Gill, Eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D. C.: The American Ornithologists' Union).

In addition to the Syracuse County racer other winter snake captures have been observed recently. A Red-tailed Hawk was observed with a snake in Douglas County on 22 November 1998 (Williams, D. 1998. *Re: Kestrels eating snakes*. KSBIRD-L archives - November 1998 (#200), <<http://listserv.ksu.edu/web?A2=ind9811&L=ksbird1&P=R9405>>) and another observed at Lake Shawnee in Shawnee County, Kansas 1 January 2000 (Larson, D. 2000. *Hawk w/Prey*. KSBIRD-L archives - January 2000 (#3), <<http://listserv.ksu.edu/web?A2=ind0001&L=ksbird1&P=R72>>). Determination of species for the latter two snakes was not made. The overall warmer climate during the last decade undoubtedly allowed the racer and probably other snake species to stay above ground farther into the winter. The sluggishness of the snakes during very cool temperatures certainly allows them to be easy prey items for hawks. Until a more typical winter weather pattern returns to the region, observations of snakes captured by Red-tailed Hawks will probably continue during the Kansas winter months.

We thank Dan Larson, Stan Roth, Sara Shane, and Dave Williams for reading an earlier draft of this note.

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