

# Kansas Ornithological Society

## BULLETIN

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY

Vol. 57

September, 2006

No. 3

### FIRST KANSAS NESTING RECORD OF THE VERMILION FLYCATCHER

Mark A. Corder

18675 W. 168<sup>th</sup> Terrace, Olathe, Kansas 66062  
([buddesystem@msn.com](mailto:buddesystem@msn.com))

The Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) is a casual, early spring visitor to the south-central and southwestern portions of Kansas (Thompson and Ely 1992). However, the following records gleaned from correspondence on the KSBIRD-L listserv, and subsequent personal observations, provide the first evidence of its status as a Kansas breeding bird.

On 3 April 2006, M. Robbins and A. Nyari reported a female Vermilion Flycatcher in Morton County, Kansas, approximately one-half mile east of the Colorado state line in the bed of the Cimarron River. Five days later on 8 April, Hart and Rakestraw reported a male Vermilion Flycatcher at Middle Spring, Cimarron National Grassland. C. Wood and Howell, while leading a birding tour on 14 April, observed two Vermilion Flycatchers at Middle Spring; however, the sexes of the two birds were not reported. Two days later, on 16 April, T. Hicks observed a courting pair in the same area, suggesting breeding activity.

At approximately 0900 CDT on 20 April 2006, I observed a male and female, presumably the same pair reported by Hicks, foraging relatively independently of one another at the south end of the parking area at Middle Spring. As ambient temperature increased, the birds became more active. They moved to the northern part of the parking area, hawking insects over and around the small pond nearby. The birds' characteristic selection of a single vantage point from which to locate prey and make their sorties facilitated photographic documentation (Fig. 1).

The male appeared to be a second year male as its breast coloration was not solidly developed to the vermilion color for which the bird is named. The age of the female is unknown. Eventually, the male was seen feeding insects to the female, and the pair was photographed sitting in the tree in which their nest was discovered about 1000 hr. Copulation was also observed



Figure 1. Breeding male Vermilion Flycatcher in Morton County with fly captured in foraging.



Figure 2. Female Vermilion Flycatcher incubating on Morton County nest.

and photographed. The nest was located approximately 1.5 m (5 ft) above the ground in a low scrubby Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*) tree, just outside the northwest perimeter of the parking area. The site is about 46 m from a group of larger trees and the small pond to the north. The male was defending this area, chasing several intruders away from the nest site, and the female was photographed sitting on the nest (Fig. 2). Close observation was facilitated by using my vehicle as a blind.

These Vermilion Flycatchers were seen by multiple observers during the remainder of April and into very early May. However, Max Thompson and others could not locate the birds on 6 May, and it appeared that the nest had been abandoned. The nest was ultimately salvaged for the collection of the Museum of Natural History at the University of Kansas (KUMNH 97376). Thompson described the nest as "very neat and put together by using spider webs," and it contained no remnants of eggs (pers. comm.). The pair that had been observed and photographed at the nest was not seen again.

The Vermilion Flycatcher is a common breeder in southern Arizona, New Mexico and Texas but is an occasional breeder in central and western Oklahoma near the line of Major-Woodard Counties and in Lincoln and Cimarron Counties (Wolf and Jones 2000). A pair nested at Black Mesa State Park in Cimarron County, Oklahoma (about 100 km WSW of the Kansas location) in 2002 (Shackford 2004). There is a single breeding record for Colorado in extreme northern Washington County (Downing 1981).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the individuals who made the initial reports leading to this record. I thank David Seibel and Bill Busby for their helpful comments on the manuscript.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Downing, H. 1981. The first nesting of Vermilion Flycatchers in Colorado. *Colorado Field Ornithol. Jour.* 15:75-76.
- Shackford, J. S. 2004. Vermilion Flycatcher. *In:* D. L. Reinking, ed. *Oklahoma Breeding Bird Atlas*. Pp. 238-239, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Thompson, M. C. & C. Ely. 1992. *Birds in Kansas*. Vol. 2, Univ. Kansas Mus. Nat. Hist., Public Education Series No. 12.
- Wolf, B. O. and S. L. Jones. 2000. Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*). *In:* The Birds of North America, No. 484 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA

## COMMON RAVEN NESTING ATTEMPT IN MORTON COUNTY, KANSAS

Mark B. Robbins<sup>1</sup>, Sebastian Patti<sup>2</sup>, Arpad Nyari<sup>1</sup>, Chris Hobbs<sup>3</sup>,  
Max C. Thompson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Kansas Natural History Museum & Biodiversity Research Center  
1345 Jayhawk Boulevard, Lawrence, KS 66045

<sup>2</sup> 552 W. Belden Ave., Chicago, Illinois 60614

<sup>3</sup> 5304 Albervan, Shawnee, KS 66216

At 0930 (CDT) on 4 April 2006, Robbins and Nyari observed two adult Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) at Point of Rocks, Cimarron National Grasslands, Morton County, Kansas. One of the birds gave a single-noted "croak," characteristic of the Common Raven, and both birds were seen hovering against a strong south wind along the lip of the cliff face with an adult Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*). Both ravens were noticeably larger than the hawk.

On 4 May 2006, Patti and Thompson observed two ravens at Point of Rocks at ca. 1000 and just before 2000 hr that same day and locality. Robbins and Nyari observed one of the ravens flying from a large cottonwood that contained a large stick nest. The nest tree was located just below Point of Rocks at the northern edge of the wooded riparian corridor. The nest was estimated to be 11-12 m from the ground, one meter in width, and 30-35 cm in depth. The following day at ca. 1530 hr, all of us returned to Point of Rocks and obtained tape recordings of both adult birds (MLNS 126896) at the nest site. The vocal samples confirmed the identification as Common Raven and we presumably observed the same individuals seen on 4 April.

On 6 May, Patti and Hobbs observed the putative female apparently incubating eggs and the presumed male, that had a diagnostic missing or damaged secondary on the left wing, foraging ca. 6 km to the north/northeast.

Ted Cable observed both ravens 9-11 May, when they were continuously calling and stripping bark off a large tree near the nest site. It appears the pair abandoned the nest between 11 and 22 May, as Cable found neither bird at the nest site on the latter date, despite the nest appearing entirely intact. Around 2100 hr on 13 June at the Elkhart sewage lagoons, Cable observed a presumed pair of Common Ravens, one of which had the diagnostic missing or damaged left secondary, suggesting that the same adults were at least unharmed. Patti visited the site on 22 June and saw no ravens, but did retrieve a Common Raven feather, which happened to be a secondary (KUNHM 97204) from the left wing, at the base of the nest tree.

Although the Point of Rocks nesting attempt failed, this is the first Common Raven breeding attempt in the state for well over 100 years (Thompson and Ely 1992). In 1871-2, Allen (1872) noted the species was still common from Leavenworth to at least the Grinnell, Gove County area, but less than twenty years later Goss (1891) related that the species likely was "only a visitant to the state". Nice and Nice (1931) stated that this "formerly abundant resident" disappeared when the large herds of bison (*Bison bison*) were exterminated. A complicating factor in reviewing older sight records for western Kansas is the possible confusion of Common Raven with the similar Chihuahuan Raven (*Corvus cryptoleucus*).

Apparently, the species went virtually unrecorded in Kansas between the time a bird was collected (KUNHM 34264) on 8 November 1916 by Edward Kern in Jewell County and the observation of two individuals at Point of the Rocks on 8 November 1997 by Patti and Mike Rader (Kansas Bird Records Committee 1998). The species appears to be increasing in abundance in Kansas, as an extraordinary 45+ were recorded along the Cimarron River between the state border and Rolla on 20 September 2003 by Patti, Hobbs, S. Seltman and Rader (Moore 2003).

The nearest nesting populations at the present time would appear to be western Baca County, Colorado (Winn 1998) and northwestern Cimarron County, Oklahoma (Patti 2004). Both these counties abut Morton County, Kansas, and nest sites there are only ca. 115 km from the Kansas nest site.

With the recent increase in the number of sightings during the breeding season, we anticipate additional nesting attempts in southwest Kansas. Because the diet of Common Raven routinely includes carrion (Boarman and Heinrich 1999), including black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) that are hunted for "sport" throughout the Cimarron National Grasslands, we recommend that all hunting with lead-based ammunition of this keystone species be eliminated. Additionally, we fully support the USFWS (2003) recommendation that a 100-300 m buffer be established around Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) nesting sites to prohibit human activities. This owl has suffered population declines, primarily as a result of the conversion of mixed and short-grass prairie to cultivation coupled with the decimation of prairie dogs, and is listed on the USFWS Birds of Conservation Concern (USFWS 2003).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Lawrence and Ruth Smith and Ted Cable for sharing their observations.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Allen, J. A. 1872. Notes of an ornithological reconnaissance in portions of Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah. Pt. 2. Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool. 3:115-183.
- Boarman, W. I. and B. Heinrich. 1999. Common Raven (*Corvus corax*). In The Birds of North America, No. 476 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.
- Goss, N. S. 1891. History of the Birds of Kansas. Crane & Co., Topeka.
- Kansas Bird Records Committee. 1998. 1997 Report of the Kansas Bird Records Committee. Kansas Ornithol. Soc. Bull. 49:26-29.
- Moore, L. 2004. Kansas Fall Season Roundup. Horned Lark 31:6-12.
- Nice, M. M. and L. B. Nice. 1931. The Birds of Oklahoma. Univ. of Oklahoma, Norman.
- Patti, S. 2004. Common Raven (*Corvus corax*). In Oklahoma Breeding Bird Atlas (D. Reinking, ed.). Norman, OK.
- Thompson, M. C. and C. Ely. 1992. Birds in Kansas. Vol. 2. Univ. Kansas Mus. Nat. Hist. Public Education Series No. 12, Lawrence.
- USFWS. 2003. Status assessment and conservation plan for the western Burrowing Owl in the United States. Biol. Tech. Publ. BTP-R6001-2003. Shepperdsville, West Virginia.
- Winn, R. 1998. Common Raven. In Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas (H. Kingery, ed.). Denver, CO.

**Errata:** Two errors were missed in the proof for the previous issue (Volume 57, No. 2) of the KOS Bulletin. In the masthead at top of the first page, "July" should read "June". The page numbers 13-16 are incorrect, and should read 21, 22, 23 and 24.