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THE MONK PARAKEET IN SHERMAN COUNTY KANSAS

Thomas G. Shane¹ and John D. Palmquist²

¹1706 Belmont, Garden City, KS 67846 (tom.shane@sbcglobal.net)

²1521 Clark, Goodland, KS 67735

The Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*), is a native resident from central Bolivia, Paraguay and southern Brazil south to central Argentina (American Ornithologists Union 1998). It has become established in the eastern United States in a number of states and has occurred in many others since the 1960s, primarily from escaped birds at multiple locations (Spreyer and Bucher 1998). During 1971 alone, 27,038 Monk Parakeets were imported into the United States for the pet trade (Krueger 2006). The first two parakeets that were recorded on the Audubon Christmas Bird Count occurred during the 1969-1970 count period and the numbers reached a peak of 4,452 on the 2003-2004 count (Audubon 2006).

In the Midwest, a pair of Monk Parakeets was first observed in 1972 in Oklahoma, building a nest in the city of Norman, and a single bird was observed building a nest in Tulsa the same year (Harden 1974). Additional sightings were also made in the state during the 1980s (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992). Recent records of nest building have been reported from the city of Altus in 2001 by Harris and Camp (2003) and at the Guthrie golf course in 2001 (B. Heck pers. comm.).

A similar scenario occurred in Nebraska, with a pair building a nest in Omaha late in 1972. Parakeets were also observed farther west in Kearney in 1975 and Lincoln in 1976 but not again in Omaha until 1998 (Sharp, Silcock and Jorgensen 2001).

The apparent first observation of the Monk Parakeet in Kansas occurred in Sherman County from June through November 1985. A pair and a third single parakeet (Fig. 1) were reported from 1.5 miles



Figure 1. Single Monk Parakeet in front of stick nest, Sherman County, Kansas, October 1985. Photo by John Palmquist.

(0.9 km) north and 2 miles (1.4 km) east of Goodland by the Lowell Harding family at their farm. The birds had built a nest (Fig. 2) with fine sticks about 20 ft (6.1 m) up in a deciduous tree adjacent to the Harding home. The site was visited by JDP and TGS and the second time by JDP for photographs on 15 October 1985. The parakeets were very noisy.

Additional sightings for Kansas include a bird in South Hutchinson, Reno County, on 19 March 1986, by Lorena Combs (C. A. Ely pers. comm.). Another parakeet was observed in Sedgwick County on 28 September 1986 by DeWayne Mitchell (Schwilling 1987). A roosting pair was observed and reported in a Kansas State University barn, Riley County, during July 1992 (Rintoul 1992).

Kansas has had a ban on Monk Parakeet possession since the early 1980s. Many caged bird lovers have asked for a lift on the ban, but the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks insists the species is a potential threat as an agricultural pest (Tomlinson 2001).

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THE DICKCISSEL NESTING IN KANSAS SANDSAGE PRAIRIE

Thomas G. Shane and Sara J. Shane

1706 Belmont

Garden City, Kansas 67846

(tom.shane@sbcglobal.net)

After an extended dry period in Finney County, Kansas, the region received some substantial precipitation during the month of May 2003. Following the rains, a profusion of wildflowers dominated by Indian blanket (*Gaillardia pulchella*), and spotted beebalm (*Monarda pectinata*) were present throughout the Sandsage Prairie south of the Arkansas River (Fig. 1).

While looking for Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinia*) nests on 28 June 2003, Sara observed a female Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*) fly into a sand sagebrush plant (*Artemisia filifolia*). Walking to the shrub she flushed the bird and discovered a nest containing five blue eggs typical of the species. The nest was located on the Sunflower Electric Power Corporation property about 7 miles south of Holcomb, KS, (37.89680° N and 100.99153° W), elevation 2,945 feet (898 m). The nest was located 30 cm (12 in) up in the north side of a 55 cm tall sagebrush plant. The absence of any Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) eggs was unusual for the Dickcissel, a common cowbird host in eastern Kansas (Zimmerman 1993). Cowbirds were present in low numbers at the Sunflower Electric site.



Figure 1. Sara Shane in the unusually heavy growth of forbs next to the sagebrush plant (*Artemisia filifolia*) supporting a Dickcissel nest.

On 29 June the nest still contained eggs, while on 4 July four young were observed that were about 3 to 4 days old. Only two, 6 to 7 day old nestlings were present on 7 July. The nest was empty on 12 July. It appears that the first egg was laid on 16 June and the young hatched on 1 July. The reason for the decline in the number of young in the nest from 4 to 7 July is unknown. A successful fledging of the two remaining young is doubtful since no adults or young could be found on 12 July, approximately two days after the young should have fledged.

The Dickcissel has been recorded nesting in dozens of different woody plant species classified as shrubs and trees, but never in sagebrush (Gross 1968, Temple 2002). The species nests in a variety of grassland habitats with dense (90 -100%) cover, moderately tall (25-150 cm) vegetation, and usually in areas of 5-15 cm litter depth along with elevated song perches. A wide variety of habitats are used, but regularly with 50% or more coverage of forbs (Temple 2002).

With normal grazing by cattle the sandsage prairies normally do not meet the habitat requirements of the Dickcissel (Temple 2002). Grasses, a few forbs, and some bare ground generally cover areas between the sand sagebrush plants. Coverage in similar grazed habitat in Wallace County, KS was determined to be; sagebrush 12%, grasses 57%, forbs 5%, and bare ground 25% (Shane 2000). In the West, coverage of big sage (*Artemisia tridentata*) and the vegetation between can range from; sage 17-45%, grass 14-57%, forbs 8-41% and bare soil 1-25% coverage (Welch 2005). The forbs in the vicinity of the Finney County Dickcissel nest could have approached 90% canopy coverage (Fig 1).

Vegetation depth and density are the most important characteristics to the female Dickcissel (Zimmerman 1993). The female that nests in thinner vegetation often must spend more time shading nestlings, consequently spending less time gathering food (Blankespoor 1970).

It appears that an unusual series of climatic conditions produced a profusion of forbs between sagebrush plants in the Sandsage Prairie south of the Arkansas River in Finney County, Kansas during the late spring of 2003, and provided sufficient substrate for a pair of Dickcissels to nest.

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