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1998 NEBRASKA NESTING REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Following a hiatus of nearly a decade, this report on the nesting birds of Nebraska reinstates a Nebraska Bird Review tradition that began with an anonymous compilation (apparently by the editor) of the notes from two observers in the 1955 breeding season (Anonymous 1956). By 1965, with the inception of the Cornell Nest Record Card Program, data was collected on standardized cards, with the completed cards being forwarded to Cornell University in New York.

I accepted responsibility for the program several years ago; but by mutual agreement with the Nebraska Ornithologist's Union leadership, I have delayed work until the Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas Project was completed. With that task largely finished, I plan to rebuild the network of cooperators who contributed so much time and expertise in the past.

The bulk of this report consists of statements of goals, explanation of format, guidance for future work, explanation of standards, etc. It is followed by a

report of my own nesting observations for 1998, and a request for assistance by interested observers in the future.

Since major changes in content, format, and direction are planned, a draft was circulated to NOU Directors with whom I had been working, as well as a variety of researchers, authors, editors and potential users, to obtain their input. Their comments and discussion proved very useful and made significant improvements in the report. Their valuable contributions are very much appreciated.

BACKGROUND

The first several nesting reports were published in written, essay-type format, and included many interesting and valuable details. As the number of contributors and records grew, however, the report soon assumed an abbreviated, almost telegraphic style (Pritchard & Pritchard 1958). This allowed the reporting of virtually every record of every species in every area of Nebraska, but precluded the inclusion of such important details as dates and locations. Nest record cards were sent directly to Cornell without retaining a copy here; hence, the information readily available to local researchers has been restricted to the limited information published in the annual nesting report.

Rather than continuing the abbreviated, tabular format used recently (e.g. Bennett 1990), my plan is to use an open, essay-type format which includes more details. Species data reported will include name, date, observer, what was observed, and a brief location. This format will allow publication of nearly complete basic data on selected species. Routine reports of common, well-reported species will be mentioned only briefly but their full data will be added to our database, forwarded to the Cornell database (Baicich & Harrison 1997), and selected species will be accessioned into the Natural Heritage Program database at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC).

DOCUMENTATION

Insufficient documentation is a problem that has plagued the study the birds of Nebraska since the first reports were published more than a century ago. A recent note was published in American Birds reporting the first Nebraska nesting record of Marbled Godwit (Grzybowski 1990), but it lacked a date and listed the location only as Dawes County. Until further details are available, I believe this format is inadequate, especially to document a first record of breeding. Unfortunately, this is nothing new. A century ago, Bates (1899) reported that Pinyon Jays had been found breeding north of Rushville in Sheridan County in 1897. Most later authors have repeated that report, while adding a few new ones, all without specific details or conclusive evidence of breeding (Cary 1902; Bruner et al. 1904; Haecker et al. 1945; Rapp et al. 1958, 1971; Johnsgard 1979a, 1979b; Rosche 1982). Only Bruner (1901) and Johnsgard (1980, 1998) were more cautious and did not assume breeding. In fact, in the century since Bates first reported breeding, but without providing detailed, conclusive evidence, there has still not been a published report of an active Pinyon Jay nest in Nebraska, and definitive proof of breeding by the species in the state has yet to be published. I mention this simply as an example of our woeful lack of knowledge about a species

that we all "know" has been breeding in the state for at least the past century. However, in the absence of complete details and definitive proof of breeding, its breeding status must remain hypothetical. We must not assume anything, about this species or any other. Dr. Robert Wolcott's gold standard, "We must know what we know, and record only what we know we know" (1899), is as applicable today as when he wrote it.

DOCUMENTATION STANDARDS

For more than a century, an adequately documented ornithological record, whether a written record or a specimen, has included at minimum: 1) the identity of the bird, 2) date, 3) location, 4) name of observer / collector, and, 5) what was observed / collected. While the bulk of such records have shifted from specimens to written records, the basic requirement for supporting data has not decreased; if anything, it has increased. A century ago Elliott Coues exhorted his colleagues to record at least a dozen items with each specimen collected. He then added, "But this [the specimen] is not enough; indeed, I am not sure that an ably conducted ornithological journal is not the better half of your operations." (Coues 1903). Without adequate supporting data, the usefulness of any record is severely limited.

With that in mind, observers are encouraged to use the Cornell Nest Record Cards to ensure the collection of complete information in a standardized format. Whether submitted on a nest record card or in a written note, for a report to be adequately documented, it MUST include at least: 1) species name, 2) date of observation, 3) a reasonably precise, identifiable location (my preference would be a legal description including township, range, section), 4) name of the observer, and 5) what was observed (e.g. nest building, nest with eggs/young, dependent non-mobile young, etc.) Additional supporting details also requested on the card include comments on habitat, nest height and location, support plant/structure, etc. If you suspect nesting by a hybrid pair, a rare or unusual species but cannot find conclusive confirmatory evidence, send in a report anyway; it may lead eventually to the confirmation of an accidental breeder, or add a new species to our breeding list.

DATA PROCESSING

Once complete, the cards will be used to compile the annual nesting report and entered into a database. After entry in the local database, records on certain species will also be accessioned into the Nature Conservancy's Natural Heritage

Program database maintained by NGPC. Finally, all completed records will then be forwarded to the database at Cornell University.

USES FOR NESTING DATA

Despite the continuous publication of our observations for a century, many of our regular breeders still have very few specific, complete data published, lacking such critical details as egg dates, dates of hatching and fledgling, location (except for the name of the county), and other details critical for researchers in

need of specific information. A prime example of the need for such data arose during the Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas Project, when I was unable to provide a list of "safe dates" when each species could be expected to be breeding (as opposed to migrating, for example). Most atlas projects provided such a list; we were unable to do so because data on egg dates, hatching and fledging were, and are, simply not available for Nebraska.

A careful reading of Ducey's exhaustive summary of breeding records (1988) reveals many of the gaps in our knowledge. The Breeding Bird Atlas Project, 1984-1989, helped close many distributional gaps; but the report, while containing much new information on timing, clutch size, habitat, etc., also points out numerous remaining gaps in our knowledge of Nebraska's breeding avifauna (Mollhoff, in press).

1998 NESTING REPORT (All records included in this report were from data collected by the author.):

In response to a researcher's request for information from another researcher, and following the previously stated goals, I briefly collected data in 1998 on House Finch breeding activity. A total of 21 active nests with eggs (NE) or nests with young (NY) were found, as follows: Cass Co. (NE) from 3 to 10 May; Saunders Co. (NE) between 2 and 12 May; Lancaster Co. (NE) between 4 and 18 May; Polk Co. (NE) on 8 May; Lincoln Co. (NE, NY) on 17 May. In addition, occupied nests without eggs were noted in Madison, Nance and Platte counties on 8 May, and Scotts Bluff Co. on 15 May. With such a tight range of dates, it appears that breeding is closely synchronized across the length of the state, despite the fact that we may be dealing with two formerly separated populations. The reported nest sites included: blue spruce (17), white spruce (2), white fir (2), and 1 in an open building. Other readily available sites to chose from included ponderosa pine, scotch pine, red cedar and a variety of other conifers and deciduous trees and shrubs, porches, garages, picnic shelters, etc. Nests were usually placed in the dense growth of small, ornamental conifers 8 to 15 feet in height; but were also occasionally found in the lower branches of mature trees. Most nests (14) were placed 6 to 10 ft. up, with extremes of 4 and 14 ft. There were frequently 1 to 3 old nests in the same tree in varying stages of disrepair, suggesting that the same tree is often re-used even when additional identical trees are available only a few feet away. No re-use of old nests was noted.

Other species reported (also by the author):

Common Poorwill: A nest with 2 eggs was found atop a ridge in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co., on 12 June, just a few yards from where a nest with 2 eggs was located between 30 and 31 May 1997.

White-throated Swift: A nest with 4 eggs was found in a cliff in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co., on 13 June.

Lewis's Woodpecker: A bird was noted defending territory and occupying a hole 58ft. up a 70 ft. dead pine snag on 22 May, but when checked again on 12 June, the nest was still empty and the birds were absent. However, an old hole 20 ft. lower

in the same snag held an American Kestrel nest with 5 eggs on the first visit, and 5 young on the latter date.

Pinyon Jay: I previously reported finding used nests south of Redington, Morrill Co., on 16 May 1998, in the immediate vicinity of adults with fledged young of the year (Silcock & Jorgensen 1998). However, further study of nests in museum collections convinces me that they were not Pinyon Jay nests, and the nests remain unidentified. Furthermore, despite extensive searching, the location of the flock's nesting territory has not yet been found.

Pygmy Nuthatch: A nest in a pine snag in Monroe Canyon, Sioux Co., held a clutch of 10 eggs on 23 May. It was near another snag with a nest that held 7 eggs on 31 May 1997.

Brewer's Blackbird: In a canyon south of Redington, Morrill Co., a nest with 3 eggs was found in a cliff niche on 17 May; while nearby, another nest with 1 egg was found 10 ft. up in a ponderosa pine on the same day. On 24 May, in the badlands north of Redington, 2 ground nests with 3 and 4 eggs were found hidden beneath clumps of aromatic sumac (*Rhus aromatica*) [=skunkbush sumac (*R.a. trilobata*)].

TARGET SPECIES

As mentioned earlier, an effort will be made to focus attention on selected species. Priority will be given to documenting species which have not previously or recently been found breeding in the state (e.g. Eurasian Collared-Dove, Sandhill Crane). It will include species undergoing range changes, in an effort to document expansion or contractions (e.g. Cattle Egret, Great-tailed Grackle). It will also include species whose breeding status is undetermined, rare, or irregular (e.g. Clark's Nutcracker, Townsend's Solitaire, Cassin's Sparrow). Also included will be those species which are probably regular breeders, but which have few detailed reports on record (e.g. Red Crossbill, Violet-green Swallow, Western Tanager), as well as those with very limited distribution (e.g. Black-necked Stilt, Mississippi Kite). Unfortunately, a large percentage of our breeders fall into one or more of the above groups.

I am requesting all available reports, regardless of how old, on breeding by Cattle Egrets, Great-tailed Grackles and House Finches. I am particularly interested in observations in the past two decades, documenting when and where breeding has occurred and when it was first noted. Complete information would be ideal, but even incomplete reports that indicate breeding will be helpful in understanding the dynamic range expansions undergone by these species. If you have any observations in your old notes, please report them so they can be added to the data base.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS NEEDED

Do you have Violet-green Swallows nesting in your nest boxes? There are virtually no details on breeding in Nebraska, probably because they often choose inaccessible nest sites. However, they sometimes nest in bluebird boxes. Especially needed are dates for eggs and/or young in the nest, and fledgling dates, as well as nest location. In addition to the examples listed previously, detailed reports are needed on Cassin's Kingbird, Western Tanager, Dark-eyed (White-

winged) Junco, Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler, Plumbeous Vireo, and Red Crossbill.

Finally, anyone finding evidence of breeding by wild birds (nest building, nests with eggs or young, adults feeding young or carrying fecal sacs, etc.) is invited to submit the information for inclusion in the annual nesting report. Interested observers are encouraged to contribute information on the Cornell Nest Record Cards and are invited to request the necessary nest record cards. A separate card is needed for each nest. Information on breeding, reports, requests for cards and completed cards may be directed to me. All observers who contribute data will be listed in the annual nesting report in a way similar to that used in the seasonal occurrence reports.

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