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A PROBABLE NESTING OF CLARK'S NUTCRACKER (*Nucifraga columbiana*) IN  
NEBRASKA

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This report provides details on the probable nesting of Clark's Nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*) in Morrill, Scotts Bluff Co., Nebraska, in 1997. It also corrects an erroneous report of nesting in the Pine Ridge area of Nebraska (Silcock & Jorgensen 1997b).

A single Clark's Nutcracker was first noted coming to a suet feeder at the home of Ms. Edna C. Thomas in Morrill 8-9 Jan 1997. It came to the feeder at least weekly and was often seen daily. A second Clark's Nutcracker appeared during the second week of Feb. Initially, the bird already present was antagonistic towards it and tried to drive it away. Over a period of several days the agonistic behavior decreased and by the end of the week the two were coming to the feeder together. Thereafter, they came to feed together regularly, usually daily, through the rest of Feb. and all of March. By early April only one bird came to the feeder, still usually daily. On 27 April this nutcracker was noted carrying off

a large chunk of suet toward a row of large cottonwoods several hundred meters away, arousing suspicion that it was carrying food to young. The trees were searched unsuccessfully for a nest.

On 7 May the adult bird came to the feeder accompanied by what appeared to be a juvenile bird, which hung back from the feeder, sitting in the shadows of a branch and begging for food (begging call, lowered body, fluttering wings, open mouth), but the adult did not feed it, nor did the begging bird feed itself. On 8 May the two birds returned to the feeder. This time the juvenile was in direct sunlight and Ms. Thomas noted the following plumage characteristics: a tannish-gray cast to the facial feathers around the beak and eyes; gray body feathers were dull colored with a slight tannish cast, rather than a clean gray like the adult's; the dark flight feathers in the wings had a definite brownish tinge rather than pure black like the adult's. Overall, she reported that the plumage was "softer appearing" than the adult's. Most of the color differences were subtle, noticeable only in direct sunlight at close range (she was able to approach to within 3 meters without alarming the young bird). On this occasion, after the adult fed itself and flew away, the young bird remained and eventually began to feed itself.

The adult continued to bring the young bird to the feeder for about a week. During this time, the adult would eat and then fly away, leaving the young one to feed itself. The adult was never seen feeding the young bird and was last seen at the feeder on 18 May. The young bird continued to come to the feeder almost daily and was last seen there on 3 June. Initially, it was remarkably tame and tolerated the presence of humans, cats, and noises. By 30 May, however, it had become more wary, scolding at cats and squirrels, and human activity would frighten it away.

Ms. Thomas had fairly extensive previous experience with Clark's Nutcrackers in Colorado over a 25-year period and was aided in her observations by information from friends still there. Her own previous experience, coupled with guidance from knowledgeable contacts and information from Bent's Life Histories, combined to allow her to search for and recognize the correct behavioral and plumage clues to adequately establish the age of the bird as a juvenile.

The timing and sequence of events fit with what would be expected for a nesting in this area. In the nearest recorded nesting, in the southern Black Hills of South Dakota, well-developed young were found in the nest on 16 April 1987, as well as young just out of the nest on 9 April 1987; in addition, recently fledged young were found on 29 April 1985 (Peterson 1985, 1988). The only other reported possible nesting in Nebraska was of a begging young bird being fed that "...was probably out of the nest not more than a few weeks..." when seen on 17 May 1987 (Tomback 1995). Based on the above, one would expect egg laying in this area to occur about mid- to late March, with the young leaving the nest in April.

There are several aspects of this report that are at variance with expected "normal" nesting. One is the disappearance of one of the adults about the time of hatching. Since both sexes normally care for the young, thus making abandonment unlikely, this might be explained by the death of one of the pair. The failure of the adult to feed the begging young bird also seems odd, especially since the young are normally dependent on the adults for food until late July or later (Diana F. Tomback, pers. comm.)

Perhaps the biggest anomaly is the nesting habitat. All reported breeding activities of the species on record have taken place in coniferous forest, usually with one or more pine species

to provide seeds for food. Nesting nutcrackers usually feed young with seeds stored the previous fall, although available alternative foods have been used when no seeds were produced (Diana F. Tomback, pers. comm.). Contrast this with Morrill, NE, which is surrounded by short- and mid-grass prairie, a limited amount of farmland, and widely scattered, planted trees, mostly deciduous. Within the town, there are a few ornamental conifers but probably not in enough numbers nor of the right species to support the usual caching of pine seeds, which is a prerequisite to normal breeding. Thus, the habitat would appear to be totally "wrong" for nutcrackers to attempt breeding. This may be the first-ever documented report of extralimital breeding, away from both "normal" habitat and range (Davis and Williams 1964). However, the birds were in Morrill when they would normally be expected to be establishing a breeding territory. This followed a widespread cone-crop failure the previous fall in the Front Range of the Rockies in Colorado (Diana F. Tomback, pers. comm.) and the presence of a normal or somewhat less than normal cone crop in northwest Nebraska (Mike Watts, pers. comm.)

Other nutcrackers were noted in the western Pine Ridge at the end of December 1996 (Silcock & Jorgensen 1997a). I saw a single bird in West Ash Creek Canyon, Dawes Co., on 3 May 1997; a flock of at least 6 was noted near Chadron State Park, Dawes Co., on 15 May 1997 (Russ Benedict, pers. comm.); and two small flocks were in Sowbelly Canyon, Sioux Co., on 22-23 May (Silcock & Jorgensen 1997b). Finally, I saw 4-6 birds in West Ash Creek Canyon on 30 May. This last group seems to be the source of the erroneous report, apparently due to a misunderstanding, of "Two additional nestings ... reported in the Pine Ridge..." (Silcock & Jorgensen 1997b). On 30 May a family-sized group of the birds was noted and there were some indications of the presence of young birds, but further review of the plumage and the observed behavior failed to demonstrate the conclusive evidence needed to prove breeding. A nest found in the immediate area that was suspected to be a nutcracker nest, also remains unidentified after comparison with museum specimens and written descriptions.

Thus, we have some evidence for successful breeding by a pair of Clark's Nutcrackers, which appeared to be occupying a territory through the season of courtship, nesting, hatching, and fledging. One of the pair was seen repeatedly with a recently-fledged young bird at the proper time. Because the habitat for miles in every direction from Morrill is almost treeless and inhospitable to the species, the most logical interpretation seems to be that the bird was indeed hatched there. However, because we did not actually find the birds with their nest, nesting by the species in this state has not been conclusively demonstrated.

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