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## 1999-2000 Nebraska Nesting Report

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## 1999 - 2000 NEBRASKA NESTING REPORT

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In the interest of expediency, the nesting reports for the 1999 and 2000 seasons are combined. In addition to records from those two years, several other previously unreported records are also included. Full dates are included with each record to minimize confusion.

Observations by the following individuals (identified in the report by their initials) are included in the nesting report: John Brenneman (JB), John Dinan (JD), Dale Dvorak (DD), Jon Farrar (JF), Michael Forsberg (MF), Joe Gabig (JG), Chris Helzer (CH), Jan Johnson (JJ), Alice Kenitz (AK), Joanne Luebbert (JL), Nick Limon (NL), Leonard McDaniel (LM), Wayne Mollhoff (WM), Gregory Pavelka (GP), Jean Pearson (JP), Neal Ratzlaff (NR), and Bill Whitney (BW).

A total of 221 records were reviewed, representing 79 species. Details will be presented only on the more significant records, with other species listed at the end of the report.

Abbreviations used in the text include: NGPC--Nebraska Game & Parks Commission; NWR--National Wildlife Refuge; UNSM--University of Nebraska State Museum; WMA--Wildlife Management Area.

### SPECIES REPORTED

Great Blue Heron: A colony of 25 occupied nests was found in a grove of old cotton-woods along the Niobrara River 9 miles southwest of Harrison, Sioux Co, on 3 June 2000. Several one-third-grown young were noted peering over the sides of the nests (WM).

Trumpeter Swan: A pair of adults with 2 cygnets was noted on Gainsforth Lake, 28 miles north of Hyannis, Cherry Co on 17 June 1999 (NR).

Bufflehead: An adult female and 4 downy young approximately 2 weeks old were found by a NGPC waterfowl biologist on 24 June 2000, on Hagan Lake, Brown Co. (NL *vide* JD). This report appears to be the first of nesting in the state.

Hooded Merganser: Four unaccompanied day-old young were found on 5 May 1997, wandering around a residential area of Waterloo, Douglas Co, several blocks from a small pond. After observers watched them for 4 hours without seeing any sign of adults, the young birds were captured and turned over to wildlife rehab personnel to prevent accidental death by cats or traffic. They raised and later released the birds (JL, JG, JD).

Although breeding has been reported in the past, this documentation is the first in many years. During the atlas project, adults were reported in Arthur, Hayes, and Pierce counties, and are occasionally reported during the summer elsewhere. Any such mid-summer sighting should be investigated for evidence of breeding.

**Golden Eagle:** A cliff nest with 2 young birds was found on Niobrara River bluffs southwest of Harrison, Sioux Co, on 3 June 2000 (MF). Another was noted in the Wildcat Hills 8 miles southeast of Redington, Morrill Co, on 11 June 2000 (WM).

**Red-tailed Hawk:** A nest with 2 downy young was noted in the edge of the Great Blue Heron colony reported previously, within 100 ft. of an occupied heron nest, on 3 June 2000 (WM).

**American Kestrel:** Four young fledged on 6 July 1999 from a farmstead nest 7 miles northwest of Wakefield, Dixon Co, (JJ). A pair found 12 June 1999 were occupying the same nest hole used the previous year in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co (JD, WM).

**Northern Bobwhite:** A rather late nest with eggs was located on 19 August 1999, 3 miles east of Brainard, Butler Co. It was still being incubated on 24 August but was found abandoned on 2 September (DD).

**Sandhill Crane:** Following several years of tantalizing hints of breeding activity, breeding was confirmed at 2 separate locations in Clay Co by Joel Jorgensen (Silcock & Jorgensen 1999), and by a NGPC biologist (Hoffmann 1999). The last previous mention of breeding was in 1883-84 when Bruner found 3 broods in a single day in Holt Co (Bruner 1902).

**Snowy Plover:** While conducting surveys for Piping Plovers on the Missouri River, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers biologists found a pair of Snowy Plovers and their nest with 3 eggs on 10 June 1998. It was located on a sandbar 1 mile northeast of Santee, Knox Co, on the Nebraska side of the river. The sandbar also held 2 Piping Plover nests. The site was visited again on 17 June; and although the Snowy Plovers were still present, the nest had been destroyed by rising water. Re-nesting was not noted (GP). This report is the first of nesting in the state. This nesting has been erroneously reported as "...a nest with eggs that was destroyed by high water on the Missouri R near Ponca in 1998." (NBR 68(3): 112). The following year, in June 1999, a pair of Snowy Plovers was seen at a Piping Plover colony at River Mile 838.0, about 10 miles upstream from the 1998 nest, but no nest was found. In May 2000, a single Snowy Plover was seen on a sandbar below Gavins Point Dam at River Mile 756.3 but was not seen again (GP).

**American Avocet:** A nest with 4 eggs was discovered beside a small pothole 2.5 miles west of Lakeside, Sheridan Co, on 1 July 2000 (WM).

**Black-necked Stilt:** An adult was located attending a single small young 3 miles west of Lakeside, Sheridan Co, on 24 July 1999 (WM).

**Common Snipe:** At least 6 Common Snipe in display flight on 3 June 2000 were spotted "winnowing" above a wet meadow alongside the

Niobrara River 8 miles southwest of Harrison, Sioux Co. Local ranchers stated that they are regular summer residents. No further evidence of nesting was searched for or noted (BW, WM).

**Wilson's Phalarope:** Two nests, each with 4 eggs, were found on 3 June 1999 on a wet meadow beside the Niobrara River 8 miles southwest of Harrison, Sioux Co (BW).

**Common Nighthawk:** A nest with 2 eggs was found in the Sandhills near Pelican Lake, Valentine NWR, Cherry Co, on 2 June 1999 (LM, JF). A single young bird, 3 weeks old, was found in the Wildcat Hills 9 miles southwest of Redington, Morrill Co, on 7 July 2000 (WM). Although common breeders in the state, the birds, eggs, and young are so cryptically marked that they are rarely discovered while nesting in their natural habitat.

**Common Poorwill:** A nest with 2 eggs was found in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 13 August 1999 (WM). One of the eggs hatched on the following day. The timing, in conjunction with previous reports of late May/early June egg dates in the same area the 2 previous years (Mollhoff 1999), may indicate that the species is double brooded in Nebraska, as reported in other parts of its range (Csada & Brigham 1992).

**White-throated Swift:** The nest (in annual use since it was first found in 1997) in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, still empty on 21 May 1999, held 4 eggs on 12 June. When visited on 25 June 1999, it held 3 eggs and 1 just-hatched young. On 24 July at least 2 fully feathered, but apparently unfledged, young appeared to be still confined to the nest crevice (WM). On 2 June 2000, the nest held 3 eggs and incubation was underway by 4 June. When next visited on 30 June 2000, the nest held 3 young birds whose head, back and wing feathers were just beginning to emerge from the quill sheaths (WM).

**Lewis's Woodpecker:** As reported elsewhere, an active nest with 5 eggs was found on 12 June 1999 in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co (Mollhoff 2000). The same nest was the focus of activity again in 2000, when a bird was present on 20 May. On 21 May 2000, three birds were present, when the pair, after driving off the other bird, engaged in courtship activities and copulation. On 2 June the nest held 6 eggs, and on 30 June begging young were heard in the nest (WM).

**Red-bellied Woodpecker:** Excavation of a nest hole by an unseen woodpecker was heard on 6 May 2000 near Ashland, Saunders Co. On 13 May the cavity held 3 eggs, and a female Downy Woodpecker was flushed from the nest. On 17 May the nest held only 1 egg, but the only birds present were a pair of very agitated Red-bellied Woodpeckers! On 22 May the nest held 4 eggs; and the only bird present, an agitated male Red-bellied Woodpecker, immediately entered the hole as I left. On 9 June the nest held 4-5 young, and by 12 June their feathers were emerging. Red-bellied Woodpeckers were in attendance on both dates. By my next visit on 2 July, the young had fledged (WM). So what was going on? On my first examination of the hole, on 13 May, the entrance hole

diameter was 2 inches, large for a Downy but just the right size for a Red-bellied. If it truly was a Red-bellied nest, was the female Downy making a surreptitious visit to steal eggs? Or, were they both laying eggs in it? The young appeared to be Red-bellied, but I could not be present to examine them at a later stage of development to establish certain identity.

**Western Wood-Pewee:** On 7 July 2000, three nests were found in the Wildcat Hills 9 miles southwest of Redington, Morrill Co. One nest held 3 eggs, the second held 3 young, 3-4 days old; and the other held 3 week-old young. One of the nests was later salvaged for the UNSM collections (WM). These reports seem to be the first detailed ones of active nests in the state. During the atlas project, territorial birds were found in Dundy Co as late as 31 May, but they did not remain to nest. Since egg-laying does not appear to begin in mid- to late June, earlier activity should be viewed with caution, unless breeding is confirmed by finding active nests with eggs or young.

**Cassin's Kingbird:** A nest with 2 eggs was found in the limber pines area south of I-80, Exit 1, Kimball Co, on 10 June 2000 (WM). Two more nests, with 5 & 2 eggs, were also found on 10 June 2000 in the Wildcat Hills 9 miles southwest of Redington; and a fourth nest with eggs was found nearby on 11 June 2000 (WM). On 8 July 2000, a nest with at least 2 young was also reported southwest of Redington (AK). While the first indication of nesting (nest-building) was reported during the atlas project, these sightings appear to be the first detailed reports of active nests in the state. After the young fledged, a nest of each of the kingbirds (Western, Cassin's, & Eastern) was salvaged for the UNSM collections. The nests were collected within an area of 200 meters to provide a comparison of nest construction within the same habitat. Within that immediate area, I estimate that Cassin's comprised 50%, Westerns 35%, and Easterns 15% of the kingbird population in 2000 (WM).

**Pinyon Jay:** The nest with 3 eggs and 3 young noted on 11 June 1999 in East Monroe Canyon, Sioux Co, has been reported elsewhere (Mollhoff 2000). The nest was later salvaged for the UNSM reference collections. A search of the Monroe Canyon flock's nesting area, as well as the nesting territories of flocks in Dawes and Morrill Cos, was made in spring 2000. However, given the almost complete failure of the 1999 ponderosa pine cone crop, the failure to find evidence of nesting was not surprising. Repeated searches for young of the year birds in all 3 flocks in May, June, and July failed to turn up any evidence of young birds, even though adult birds were found on each visit, leading to the suspicion that breeding might not have occurred. Although fall nesting has been reported in Arizona and New Mexico, it has been reported only with the maturation of an exceptionally large crop of pinyon pine cones in late summer, a resource not available here (Ligon 1971).

**American Crow:** After the warmest, mildest winter on record, followed by an early spring, finding a pair engaged in nest-building in Lincoln, Lancaster Co, on 28 Feb. 2000, led to the expectation of

unusually early nesting. The clutch of 4 eggs was complete by 3 April, with hatching by 16 April. (WM). However, a review of historical records in the UNSM collections revealed that this date was merely average, with several earlier egg dates recorded in the 1890's, a decade of notoriously severe winters!

**Horned Lark:** A nest with 3 eggs was found in a shortgrass prairie area 7 miles southwest of Harrison, Sioux Co, on 3 June 2000 (WM). Although the bird a common breeder, there have been few detailed reports of nesting.

**Tree Swallow:** Nest boxes were the focus of intense activity at Mahoney State Park, Cass Co, on 6 May 2000, with 4 nests under construction, and another already holding an egg. By 12 May two clutches were complete, while the other 3 nests were still under construction (WM).

**Violet-green Swallow:** Nest-building was noted in an old Pygmy Nuthatch hole in Monroe Canyon, Sioux Co, and in a hole in a cliff in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 11 June 1999. On 25 June the former nest held 4 eggs, while the latter held 5 eggs. By 24 July the young in the Dawes Co nest were nearly ready to fledge (WM, JD). These reports seem to be the first detailed ones of active nests in the state. The remains of the cliff nest were later salvaged for the UNSM reference collections. Nest-building was nearly complete on 2 June 2000 in the same two holes mentioned above. On 30 June the Dawes Co nest held 5-6 young 4-7 days old. The Sioux Co nest was not visited again because of the instability of the nest snag (WM).

**Black-capped Chickadee:** A nest with 6 half-grown young was found on 12 June 1999 in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co (WM). A nest with 6 day-old young was found in Ashland, Saunders Co, on 6 May 2000. Another nest with 5 eggs was found in East Monroe Canyon, Sioux Co, on 19 May 2000; and a nest with 4-5 half-grown young was located in the Wildcat Hills 9 miles southwest of Redington, Morrill Co, on 11 June 2000. On a visit to the Redington nest on 7 July, the chickadees were gone as expected, but the cavity now held the 4 eggs of a pair of Eastern Bluebirds (WM).

**White-breasted Nuthatch:** A nest with 5 eggs was found on 20 May 2000 in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, in the same natural cavity used by a pair in 1997. The cavity had not been occupied during the intervening years (WM).

**Red-breasted Nuthatch:** A nest with 5 eggs was found in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 23 May 1999 (WM). Another nest in the same area held 4-5 half-grown young on 21 May 2000 (WM).

**Pygmy Nuthatch:** Adults were still adding bits of nest material to a nest that already held 9 eggs in East Monroe Canyon, Sioux Co. on 22 May 1999. A nearby nest held 8 eggs on the same day and was attended by a "pair" of 4 birds. On 11 June the latter nest held at least 6 fully feathered young (WM). A flurry of nest excavation was noted from 25 to

27 March 2000 in Dawes and Sioux Cos, with 5 nest holes in initial stages of excavation. However, later visits revealed that none of the 5 holes was completed or used this year. On 19 May 2000, two nests were found in Monroe and East Monroe Canyons, Sioux Co, with 6 and 7 eggs respectively (WM). Hole excavation was also noted on 22 April 2000, 7 miles south of Gering, Scotts Bluff Co. (AK).

**Blue-gray Gnatcatcher:** Although initially reported via the internet as a bird on a nest at the unusually early date of 4 May 2000, further inquiry revealed that it was simply sitting in the incomplete cup while it continued nest construction at Neale Woods Nature Center, Douglas Co. By 18 May it had abandoned the site and was salvaging the material to reconstruct the nest at another, undiscovered location (JB). A report of an adult feeding begging young on 22 August 1999 in the limber pines area south of Exit 1, I-80, Kimball Co, (Silcock 1999) prompted a search of the area the following spring for further evidence of breeding. On 10 June 2000, several pairs were located, and a nest with 4 eggs was found (WM). On 11 June 2000, 3 more nests were located in the Wildcat Hills 9 miles southwest of Redington, Morrill Co. One was complete but still empty; one held a clutch of 4 eggs; and the third held 2 eggs and a single just-hatched young bird. One of the nests was later salvaged for the UNSM reference collections (WM).

**Eastern Bluebird:** A nest with 4 half-grown young was found in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 2 June 2000. On 6 May 2000, a nest box in Mahoney State Park, Cass Co, held 2 bluebird eggs plus a House Sparrow egg, the latter probably an accidental deposit from a pair of sparrows occupying a box just a few feet away (WM). (See also one reported in the previous chickadee report.)

**Townsend's Solitaire:** Discovery of a suspicious-acting adult prompted an unsuccessful search for evidence of breeding in East Monroe Canyon, Sioux Co, on 11 June 1999 (JD, WM). A few birds seem to be regular summer residents of the Pine Ridge in at least Dawes and Sioux counties; but since there are only a few reports of breeding, a search for evidence of breeding should be made whenever they are found.

**Swainson's Thrush:** Several territorial singing males were present around the picnic ground in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, in May, June, and July 1999, but no evidence of nesting was found (JD, WM). The only nest reported in the state was found in that area (Rosche 1974). Whenever the birds are found, a search for evidence of nesting should be made. The birds were not present in that area during the same time frame in 2000 (WM).

**Yellow-rumped Warbler:** A nest with 4 half-grown young was found 48 ft. up a 54 ft.-tall ponderosa pine in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 12 June 1999 (JD, WM). The nest was later salvaged for the UNSM reference collections. This is apparently only the second detailed nest report for the state.

**Yellow Warbler:** An exceptionally high nest was found 40 ft. up on a low cottonwood branch in the Gilbert-Baker State WMA campground in Monroe Canyon, Sioux Co, on 11 June 1999 (JD). Nests are typically placed 4-8 ft. above ground.

**Kentucky Warbler:** A ground nest with 4 eggs was found on 15 June 2000 at Neale Woods Nature Center, Washington Co (JB).

**American Redstart:** Nest-building by a female was noted in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 12 June 1999. On 25 June it held a single egg but the nest subsequently disappeared (JD, WM).

**Western Tanager:** After a long, patient search, a nest with 3 eggs (and 4 Brown-headed Cowbird eggs) was located in a small pine in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 12 June 1999 (JD). This nest is apparently only the second one reported with details. The nest was later salvaged for the UNSM reference collections.

**Chipping Sparrow:** A nest with 3 eggs was found on 11 June 1999 in Monroe Canyon, Sioux Co (WM, JD). The nest was later salvaged for the UNSM reference collections. Another nest with 3 eggs was found in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 2 June 2000 (WM). Although they are one of the common breeders in the Pine Ridge, few details of nesting in the wild have been reported.

**Lark Sparrow:** A ground nest with 2 eggs (plus a Brown-headed Cowbird egg) was found beneath a clump of yucca and bunchgrass on 10 June 2000 in the limber pines area south of Exit 1, I-80, Kimball Co (WM).

**McCown's Longspur:** A nest with 3 eggs was found on 3 June 2000, 7 miles southwest of Harrison, Sioux Co. It was located in a busy "colony" of a dozen or so displaying birds (WM).

**Rose-breasted Grosbeak:** Nest-building was noted 14 May 2000 near Ashland, Saunders Co. The nest held 4 eggs on 22 May. The nest was later salvaged for the UNSM reference collections (WM).

**Black-headed Grosbeak:** A nest with 4 young, 3-5 days old, was found on a horizontal box elder branch in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 12 June 1999 (JD). This report seems to be the first detailed one of an active nest. The nest was later salvaged for the UNSM reference collections. On 4 June 2000, a pair was putting the finishing touches on an inaccessible nest in West Ash Canyon. On 30 June 2000, another nest with 4 half-grown young was found nearby (WM). Both nests were in the area of the 1999 nest reported above.

**Bobolink:** Data was made available from a study of nest placement and parasitism in native grass wet meadows along the Platte River in Hall Co in 1997. Eight nests with eggs were found, with egg dates of 6-30 June and 2-18 July. All nests were parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds, apparently causing frequent abandonment by the Bobolinks. Young Bobolinks were successfully fledged from only 2 or 3 of the nests(CH).

**Brewer's Blackbird:** Two nests with 4 and 5 half-grown young, and another with 1 egg plus 4, 2-3 day-old young, were found in the



grasslands 9 miles east of Harrison, Sioux Co, on 11 June 1999 (JD, WM). A nest was later salvaged for the UNSM reference collections. A nest with 5 eggs (in the same area mentioned above) was abandoned after a heavy rainstorm on 19 May 2000. The eggs were later salvaged for the UNSM collections. Another nearby nest held 4 eggs on 2 June 2000. A nest in the Wildcat Hills 9 miles southwest of Redington, Morrill Co, held 3 eggs on 11 June 2000. Nests were found on the ground in a buckbrush (*Symphoricarpos* sp.) patch, 2 ft. up in skunkbush sumac (*Rhus aromatica trilobata*), 2 ft. up a juniper sapling, and 2-10 ft. up in ponderosa pine (WM). Adults were also noted feeding begging young 9 miles southwest of Redington, Morrill Co, on 8 July 2000 (AK).

**Bullock's Oriole:** On 10 June 2000, a nest with 3 eggs was found in the Wildcat Hills 9 miles southwest of Redington, Morrill Co. Another nest, found in the same area on 11 June, was complete but still empty. All 3 nests found in the area were placed in the top branches of ponderosa pines. One was later salvaged for the UNSM collections (WM).

**House Finch:** A nest with 5 eggs (plus a Brown-headed Cowbird egg AND an adult female cowbird!) was found on 6 May 2000 at Mahoney State Park, Cass Co (WM). A nest with 3 eggs (plus 2 cowbird eggs) was found in southwestern Lincoln, Lancaster Co, on 25 May 2000 (JP). A nest with young in the process of fledging was found 27 May 2000 in North Loup, Valley Co. (WM).

**Red Crossbill:** Following a bumper ponderosa pine cone crop in 1998, adults and young were abundant in the Pine Ridge in May 1999. An adult male was noted feeding a pair of begging fledged young in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, on 21 May 1999. Total numbers running into the hundreds were noted in a morning's work in East Monroe Canyon, Sioux Co (WM). Following the bumper crop of 1998, a near-total failure of the cone crop in summer 1999 led to lowered expectation of nesting in spring 2000. Despite extensive searching in the Pine Ridge and the Wildcat Hills, only a single family-sized group of birds, feeding a single begging young, was located 10 miles southwest of Ft. Robinson, Sioux Co, on 3 June 2000 (WM).

**Pine Siskin:** A number of birds lingered into the breeding season in Lincoln, Lancaster Co, but only a single nest was located. It was built in Woods Park between 19 and 24 April 2000; but being of typically flimsy construction, the nest was blown from its branch in a Douglas fir during a moderate wind on 28 April. Other nest-building was noted in the area, but no other nests were located (WM).

**House Sparrow:** Forgoing more typical protected sites in nest boxes and inside buildings, a pair was found building its domed nest in a mulberry tree beside a barracks at Camp Ashland, Saunders Co, on 15 April 2000. On 23 April the nest held 2 eggs, and considering the extremely dry spring, was very likely successful (WM).

### ADDITIONAL SPECIES

Species reported which were not detailed in the account above include: Western Grebe, Canada Goose, Wood Duck, Mallard, Redhead, Wild Turkey, Killdeer, Mourning Dove, Great Horned Owl, Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Eastern Kingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue Jay, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Cliff Swallow, Barn Swallow, Rock Wren, House Wren, American Robin, European Starling, Northern Cardinal, Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, and Western Meadowlark.

### REQUEST FOR REPORTS

Anyone finding evidence of breeding by wild birds (nest building, active nests with eggs or young, adults feeding or tending young) is encouraged to submit the information for inclusion in the nesting report. Interested observers who anticipate finding nests are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the type of information needed. Reports of breeding and requests for breeding data cards should be directed to the author. All observers who contribute data will be credited in the nest report.

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