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THE 2001 NEBRASKA NESTING REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The spring of 2001 will likely be remembered as the winter that wouldn't end, especially in central and western Nebraska. The last remnants of roadside snowbanks remained in the east until 10 April, but the last *blizzard* closed down the Panhandle on 21-22 April, and the last appreciable snowfall there was on 19 May. None of these dates represent late records, but are remarkably later than average for the past 10-15 years, and seemed especially burdensome following the long cold winter and the remarkably early spring the previous year.

While I recognize the danger inherent in making generalizations when working with such a small sample size, I feel it worthwhile to comment on differences and similarities between the timing of the 2000 and 2001 nesting seasons. While only a few species allowed direct comparison by being found nesting again in the same location as last year, the following information is offered for what it's worth. It would have been interesting to compare data on more of the cavity nesters, but unfortunately, I did not locate any active nuthatch nests this year, nor take the time to search out more of the other cavity nesters.

In the southern Panhandle, Cassin's, Western and Eastern Kingbirds, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Bullock's Oriole (and Red-winged Blackbird in the east), all appeared to be 2-3 weeks later in their breeding cycle than last year. By contrast, also in the Panhandle, Great Blue Heron, Great Horned Owl, Lewis's Woodpecker, Western Wood-Pewee, Lark Sparrow, and McCown's Longspur seemed to be on the same schedule as last year, as were American Crow, Common Grackle, and House Finch in the east.

While it seems intuitive that some species would respond to the late spring by nesting later, why *didn't* some other species? How much of the difference in timing was actually due to the weather, and how much was due to the randomness of the small sample size or other variables? Obviously, it will take more years of data collection and a much larger sample size, one that includes all species, before generalizations can be made. Witnessing a blizzard disrupt breeding by Pinyon Jays and Canada Geese makes the reason for those delays pretty apparent. But what about kingbirds and gnatcatchers that were not even present yet? Were they later because of delayed plant growth and insect development? More study and many more records are needed before we can speak with certainty.

The following observers contributed reports and information: John Dinan (JD), Belle Esau (BE), Jon Farrar (JF), Michael Forsberg (MF), David Hellbusch (DH), Alice Kenitz (AK), Clem Klaphake (CK), Wayne Mollhoff (WM), and Jean Pearson (JP).

A total of 140 reports were received on 44 species. There were no new state species breeding records reported, but the discovery of an old Pinyon Jay nesting colony, along with finding a new nest colony under construction, were exciting firsts in their own right.

Abbreviations used: E - east, N - north, NWR - National Wildlife Refuge, S - south, SP - State Park, UNSM - University of Nebraska State Museum, W - west, WMA - Wildlife Management Area.

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

- Eared Grebe** A colony with 9 nests was located 0.5 mi. E of Lakeside, Sheridan Co., on 29 June 2001. Two nests with 2 eggs and 3 nests with 3 eggs were noted, but some eggs may have been concealed by vegetation. The nests were still being incubated on 13 July (WM).
- Great Blue Heron** The colony in a cottonwood grove on the Niobrara River 8 mi. SW of Harrison, Sioux Co., had about 15 active nests. The young were well feathered and appeared to be nearly full-grown on 2 June 2001 (WM,JD).
- White-faced Ibis** Birds were noted in suitable habitat in southern Sheridan / northern Garden Cos. by 3 June 2001 (JD,WM). On 25 June 2001, in Sheridan Co. near the Crescent Lake NWR road several miles SSE of Lakeside, several birds were seen carrying vegetation in their beaks and landing at scattered locations in a wet area of tall grassy vegetation, apparently nest-building. A search for nests was not made (CK). Dozens of birds remained in the area through at least 11 August, but young-of-the-year birds were not reported (WM).
- Turkey Vulture** A nest with a pair of eggs was found in a manger in an empty horse barn 3 mi. W of Albion, Boone Co., in June 2001. The eggs hatched several days after they were found. One young disappeared almost immediately, probably lost to a predator. The adults and the surviving young were tolerant of visits by the owners, sometimes soaring around them during the week they remained around the farmstead after the young one fledged in August (DH).
- Trumpeter Swan** A pair occupying a nest on South Wolfenberger Lake 3 mi. W of Hyannis, Grant Co., was incubating on 3 June 2001 (WM).
- Northern Harrier** See the mention in the Swainson's Hawk account.
- Swainson's Hawk** A bird incubating a single egg on 3 June 2001, 8 mi. N of Lakeside, Sheridan Co., abandoned the nest sometime before 29 June (JD,WM). A tree nest at Willy Lake, 1.5 mi SE of Bingham, Sheridan Co., had a pair of Northern Harriers present on 20 May 2001(AK), but was occupied and being incubated by a pair Swainson's Hawks on 3 June (WM,JD). On 14 July a pair of half-grown young Swainson's with the adults in attendance occupied the nest (WM). The earlier presence of the Northern Harriers on the nest remains a mystery, especially since they normally nest on the ground. A nest with a trio of 2/3 grown young was noted 1 mi. W of Ellsworth, Sheridan Co., on 13 July 2001 (WM). A low nest in chokecherry bushes just a few feet from a busy railroad track 2 mi. E of Ashby, Grant Co., held 3 half-grown young on 13 July 2001 (WM). A late nest 3 mi. N of Lakeside, Sheridan Co., held a pair of 1/3 grown young on 14 July 2001. On 11 August the grown young were still in the nest (WM).
- Red-tailed Hawk** In a repeat of last year, a pair again occupied their nest in the edge of the Great Blue Heron colony 8 mi. SW of Harrison, Sioux Co., on 2 June 2001; the contents of the nest were not visible however (WM,JD).
- American Kestrel** A pair occupied the same cavity that was used in 1998 and 1999 in a dead pine snag 11 mi. SE of Crawford in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co. (It was not checked in 2000.) The nest held 4 eggs on 1 June 2001 (WM). Two nests were found in natural cavities in the sandstone buttes 8-9 mi. SW of Harrison, Sioux Co. Both nests (one with 4 eggs) were under incubation when visited on 2 June 2001 (MF,WM).
- Sharp-tailed Grouse** A nest with eggs near a cow trail was pointed out by a dog 20 mi. S of Whitman, Grant Co., on 16 June 2000 (MF)(Forsberg 2001).
- Black-necked Stilt** The following 6 nests near Lakeside, Sheridan Co., were studied and photographed in May-June 2000 (Farrar 2001).

A nest just W of Lakeside held 4 eggs on 16 May 2000, all of which hatched on 7 June (JF).

Another nest 1.3 mi. E of Lakeside also held 4 eggs on 16 May 2000, but was abandoned on 18 May due to heavy rain and rising water. By 2 June an apparent replacement nest nearby held 4 eggs (JF).

Two nests were found 5 mi. W of Lakeside. One held 4 eggs on 4 June 2000; the other held 4 eggs on 6 June (JF).

A nest 3 mi. W of Lakeside held 4 eggs on 3 June 2000 (JF).

Great Horned Owl A bird was incubating its 2 eggs in a nest atop an ice-covered tree 0.5 mi. N of Dix, Kimball Co., during a day of freezing mist on 24 March 2001 (WM).

Another bird, surely the winner of the one tough mother award, was incubating in an icy tree on an exposed hilltop 7 mi. W of Big Springs, Deuel Co., also on 24 March 2001. The young hatched just after a blizzard on 7-8 April that dropped temperatures to 20 degrees F., buffeted the area with 80+ kph (50+ mph) NW winds, 13mm (0.5 in.) of rain and 15 cm (6 in.) of snow, knocked out power and closed I-80 to all traffic. This was followed by similar winds and temperatures in a storm of 21-22 April that left 20 cm (8 in.) of snow and closed roads throughout the Panhandle. When visited on 29 April, the temperature was 82 degrees F. and the young birds were perched on the edge of the nest, their mouths wide open, using gular flutter to cool themselves (WM).

White-throated Swift The nest in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co, 12 miles SE of Crawford that has been in use and under observation annually since it was found in 1998 was not used this year. The birds were present in the area and were seen visiting the crevice on 27 April 2001, but the nest was unoccupied and appeared to have been abandoned by 1 June. When visited again on 13 July following a heavy rainstorm, the outer wall of the crevice was found to have collapsed, carrying the nest away with it (WM).

Lewis's Woodpecker A pair of birds in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co., again occupied the same cavity that has been used since at least 1999. The nest held 3 eggs when visited on 1 June 2001. On 14 July the adults were carrying food into the cavity, and by 11 August one adult was still present at the nest with one young-of-the-year bird and 2 others that also appeared to be juveniles (WM).

Western Wood-Pewee A pair was busy working on a nest at Smith Lake, Sheridan Co., on 3 June 2001, with the nest about 1/3 complete. On 29 June the nest appeared to be complete but was still not occupied. By 13 July, 4 eggs were under incubation. Since this is at the eastern limit of proven nesting (Mollhoff 2001), the birds were carefully identified by plumage, bill coloration and calls. The nest was later salvaged for the UNSM collections (WM,JD).

On 1 July 2001, 2 nests (with 2 and 3 eggs) were found 9 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co. Another nest with a single egg was found abandoned in that vicinity. A fourth nest was under construction only 50 meters away from the abandoned nest, possibly a re-nesting following a failed first attempt (WM).

Cassin's Kingbird Two nests (each with 4 eggs) were found on 1 July 2001, 9 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co. (WM).

Western Kingbird A nest with 4 eggs was found 9 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co., on 30 June 2001. Two more nests found in the vicinity were still under construction on the same date (WM).

Eastern Kingbird A nest with an incomplete clutch of 2 eggs was found on 30 June 2001, 8 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co. (WM).

Loggerhead Shrike A nest with 6 half-grown young was found in the Sandhills a mile north of Smith Lake, Sheridan Co., on 3 June 2001. The nest was later

salvaged for the UNSM collections (WM,JD).

Pinyon Jay A group of 9 nests was found on 14 April 2001, the remains of a nesting colony that was probably occupied in 1999 or 2000. It was located 7 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co. (WM).

After several early attempts to locate the 2001 nesting colony were frustrated by spring snowstorms (which also repeatedly disrupted the jays' breeding activities - note the weather comments in the Great Horned Owl account), the colony was finally located about 1 km (0.6 mi) from the old colony mentioned above. When finally located on 29 April 2001, they were engaged in nest-building and had 10 nests about half completed. The frenzy of activity concentrated on a single hectare (2.5 acre) hillside was truly a sight to behold! However, after several more bouts of inclement weather (including snow on 3 and 19 May), the colony was largely abandoned, and only a single nest (with 5 eggs) was occupied on 1 June. That nest was later salvaged for the UNSM collections. The flock remained on their territory but no other nesting colony was located (WM).

American Crow Nest-building was initiated in Lincoln, Lancaster Co., by 2 March 2001 (WM).

Tree Swallow A nest box with 5 eggs was noted on 27 May 2001 at Mahoney SP, Cass Co. (WM).

Adults were noted feeding fledged, begging young at Smith Lake, Sheridan Co. on 29 June 2001 (WM).

Violet-green Swallow The cliff cavity below the White-throated Swift colony noted above, used in 1999 and 2000, was not used this year (WM). Whether its non-use could be related to the absence of the swifts is unknown.

Cliff Swallow A busy colony of ~175 nests on the side of a butte 9 mi. SW of Harrison, Sioux Co., was visited on 25 June 2001. The nests were placed beneath overhanging ledges, in cavities and irregularities, and around exposed devil's corkscrews (fossilized *Daemonelix* sp. burrows). Many of the nests were still under construction or repair. One of the aforementioned American Kestrel nest cavities was located just beneath the colony (MF,WM).

Rock Wren A bird was noted carrying nest material into a cavity in an isolated boulder on 1 June 2001, 9 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co. On 30 June the completed nest held an incomplete clutch of 3 eggs (WM,JD,MF).

Marsh Wren A nest with an egg and at least 2 tiny young was found at Willy Lake 1.5 mi. E of Bingham, Sheridan Co., on 14 July 2001 (WM).

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher A nest with 2 eggs was found 9 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co., on 1 July 2001 (WM).

Yellow Warbler A low nest was discovered 70cm (2 ft.) above the ground in a patch of buckbrush (*Symphoricarpos* sp.) 3 mi. NE of Angora, Morrill Co., on 29 June 2001. It held 2 eggs and 2 just-hatched young. The nest was later salvaged for the UNSM collections (WM).

Vesper Sparrow A nest with 4 eggs was found in a rural road ditch 1 mi. W of Schramm SP, Sarpy Co, on 15 May 2001 (CK).

Lark Sparrow Two ground nests with 4 & 6 eggs were found 8 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co., on 1 June 2001 (WM,MF,JD). On 30 June both nests were empty.

Two additional ground nests with 1 & 6 eggs were found in the same vicinity on 30 June 2001 (WM).

A tree nest with a single egg was located nearby on 1 July 2001 (WM).

McCown's Longspur A nest with 3 young several days old was found 7 mi. SW of Harrison, Sioux Co., on 3 June 2001 (MF,JD,WM). Other birds in the colony were noted carrying nest material on 2 June (JD,WM).

Great-tailed Grackle Following up on a two-year-old lead, a nesting colony was located in the Saunders Co. portion of the Jack Sinn WMA 4 mi. SE of Ceresco, Saunders and Lancaster Cos., on 8 June 2001. Two nests held single eggs, 3 nests held 2 eggs, 2 nests held 3 eggs, and 3 nests held 4 eggs. Another nest held 2 nearly grown young. An additional 7 empty nests were also found on that date. One nest with its clutch of eggs, apparently tipped over during a thunderstorm the previous night, was salvaged for the UNSM collections (WM,JD).

Bullock's Oriole Two nests under construction were found 1 June 2001, 8 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co., one barely started, the other nearly complete (WM,JD,MF).

On 29 June 2001, a nest with 4 just-hatched young was found 3 mi. NE of Angora, Morrill Co. (WM).

On 30 June 2001, a nest with 4 young 3-5 days old was found 9 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co. (WM).

On 1 July 2001, 3 nests were found 9 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co. One of the nests was still under construction, another held a single egg, and the third held 3 or 4 young several days old (WM).

Pine Siskin A delayed report was received of a pair with 2 just-fledged young just out of the nest in Petersburg, Boone Co., in June 1996 (BE).

House Finch A nest with 3 eggs was found 27 May 2001 at Mahoney SP, Cass Co. (WM).

A nest in Lincoln, Lancaster Co., held 5 eggs on 28 May 2001. The first egg hatched on 9 June; all were hatched by 11 June (JP).

A nest with eggs was found in North Loup, Valley Co., on 26 May 2001 (WM).

ADDITIONAL SPECIES

Other species which were recorded but not mentioned in the accounts above include: Canada Goose, Wood Duck, Mourning Dove, Red-headed Woodpecker, Warbling Vireo, Blue Jay, House Wren, American Robin, Brown Thrasher, Chipping Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird, and Common Grackle.

REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE

As stated in previous reports, more input is needed. While regular reports made consistently over a period of years of birds in the same area are most valuable, all reports are useful. Careful identification of all species is critical. Key basic information includes: location, date, what was seen, and type of activity noted. Also important and useful is information about habitat, nest placement and weather. Anyone who finds evidence of breeding by wild birds (nest building, nests with eggs or young, adults feeding or tending young) is encouraged to submit the information for inclusion in the nesting report. Observers who expect to find evidence of breeding may request information on procedure for data collection or record cards from the author. All observers who contribute data will be credited in the nest report.

LITERATURE CITED

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