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## The 2002 Nebraska Nest Report

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## THE 2002 NEBRASKA NEST REPORT

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In contrast to last year, with "the winter that wouldn't end," this breeding season began with a "spring that wouldn't begin." The winter was mild and uneventful, but although the spring was neither cold nor stormy, the usual warmup did not come, and when the weather finally warmed in May, it brought no moisture. The resulting drought was worst in the west and southwest, areas that had already been abnormally dry for several years. In mid-June in the southern Panhandle, many ranchers were still feeding hay to the cattle because the grass simply did not grow. The dry conditions surely had an effect on breeding birds of all kinds, and probably affected shorebirds and ground-nesting birds especially, due to lack of standing water and ground cover. While the absence of detailed base-line data makes the results impossible to quantify, probably some and perhaps many of the birds observed simply spent the summer without breeding. With this qualified comment comes the predictable plea for more breeding records from across the state, enabling us to build a database of detailed breeding records of selected areas by recording observations in the same area year by year, along with data on accompanying and associated environmental conditions.

### OBSERVERS

The following observers submitted records for the nesting report: Linda Brown (LB), John Ewing (JE), Robin Harding (RH), Helen Hughson (HH), Alice Kenitz (AK), Clem Klaphake (CK), Marty Mathieson (MM), Wayne Mollhoff (WM), Colleen Noecker (CN), Don Paseka (DP), Janis Paseka (JP), Lanny Randolph (LR), A. Don Showen (ADS), David Stage (DS), J. Harley Winfrey (HW), Sarah Winfrey (SW).

A total of 348 reports was received on a total of 81 species. Species reported but not included in the following species accounts include: Wood Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Cooper's Hawk, American Kestrel, Ring-necked Pheasant, Killdeer, American Avocet, Mourning Dove, Great Horned Owl, Eastern Phoebe, Cliff Swallow, Barn Swallow, House Wren, Brown Thrasher, Chipping Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Red-winged Blackbird, Orchard Oriole, and Baltimore Oriole.

### ABBREVIATIONS USED

ICSP = Indian Cave State Park, SP = State Park, WHNC = Wildcat Hills Nature Center, WMA = Wildlife Management Area

### SPECIES ACCOUNTS

**Canada Goose** It was interesting to note the east to west progression of the season on a cross-state trip on 5 April 2002. At Twin Lakes WMA 12 mi. SE of Seward, Seward Co., a pair occupied a nest with 5 eggs. Along the Middle Loup River, 4 mi. NW of Dunning, Blaine Co., a pair was investigating a nest site but had not yet occupied it. In Grant Co. near Whitman and Hyannis, pairs were present but were not yet showing interest in the available nest tubs. (LB,WM)

- Trumpeter Swan** On 2 June 2002 a pair of adults was closely guarding 4-5 young on the nest on south Wolfenberger Lake 3 mi. W of Hyannis, Grant Co. (WM) A pair of adults with 4 young were seen on the lake 2 mi. E of Hyannis, Grant Co., on 27 July 2002. (DS)
- Mallard** Forgoing the usual ground nest, a nest built 7 ft. up in the crotch of a tree held 7 eggs on 9 July 2002 in Sioux Co., 14 mi. NNE of Scottsbluff. (HH)
- Sharp-tailed Grouse** An adult and 3 very small young were noted in Sioux Co. on 8 June 2002, 16 mi. NNE of Scottsbluff. (HH)
- Wild Turkey** A hen and large brood of 15 young were noted near Elkhorn, Douglas Co., on 22 July 2002. (DS)
- Northern Bobwhite** A female with a brood of 12 young were reported near Osceola, Polk Co., on 23 June 2002. (DS)
- Pied-billed Grebe** A nest with 8 eggs was located on the Saunders Co. portion of Jack Sinn WMA, Saunders/Lancaster Cos., SE of Ceresco on 5 June 2002. (WM) A nest with a single egg was found on Willy Lake, Sheridan Co., 1 mi. S of Bingham, on 23 June 2002. (WM)
- Western Grebe** A colony of six nests with eggs was located on Willy Lake, a traditional breeding site in Sheridan Co., 1 mi. S, 1 mi. E of Bingham on 23 June 2002. An additional 65 non-breeding *Aechmophorus* sp. grebes were also present. When revisited on 19 July, there were 8 adults and 3 young birds present. The non-breeding birds were no longer present. By the latter date, the surface area of the lake had decreased by 15-20%, the water level was several feet below normal, and the deepest part of the lake was less than 2 ft. deep. The water was a turbid greenish brown and how the grebes could find and catch fish was a mystery. (WM)
- Clark's Grebe** A nest with eggs was located in the above-mentioned colony on Willy Lake on 23 June 2002. On 19 July a pair of young birds was observed begging from and being fed by the pair of adults. Although adults and young have been observed here and elsewhere in the state for a number of years, this might be the first observation of a nest with eggs reported. (WM)
- Great Blue Heron** The breeding colony on the Niobrara River 9 mi. SW of Harrison, Sioux Co., had 2-3-week-old young peering over the edges of the nests on 31 May 2002. Sixteen active nests were noted. The usual pair of Red-tailed Hawks (with at least one young in the nest) was again in residence. (WM) A large colony on the Platte River in Dawson Co. near Gothenburg moved and set up in a new location in a riparian cottonwood grove north of mile marker 213.5 north of I-80. On 11 May 2002 more than 90 nests were seen before the emerging foliage hid them from view. (WM) Active colonies were noted on 20 June 2002 in Cherry Co. on Gordon Ck. 5 mi. S of Merritt Res. and at Mayhew Lake, 22 mi. N of Mullen. (CK)
- Northern Harrier** A pair was noted nest-building at Medicine Creek Res., Frontier Co., on 21 April 2002. (LR,RH)
- Red-tailed Hawk** A nest at the edge of a Great Blue Heron colony 9 mi. SW of Harrison, Sioux Co., held at least 1 young on 31 May 2002. (WM)
- Golden Eagle** A bird was noted incubating a nest in Sioux Co. 12 mi. N of Scottsbluff on 15 April 2002. Two young were noted on 12 May and one fledged on 12 July. (HH)
- American Coot** Four nests with apparently complete clutches of 7-18 eggs were located on a pond in the Saunders Co. portion of the Jack Sinn WMA, SE of Ceresco, Saunders/Lancaster Cos., on 7 June 2002(WM). Two weeks later, on 23

June 2002 at Willy Lake, Sheridan Co., 6 nests with incomplete clutches of 2-5 eggs were found, along with one nest containing 7 eggs. (WM)

**Long-billed Curlew** Two half-grown young were noted feeding with a pair of adults on 15 June 2002 in Sioux Co. 10 mi. N of Scottsbluff. (HH)

**Common Nighthawk** A nest with 2 eggs was found in shortgrass prairie 5 mi. S of Harrisburg, Banner Co., on 7 July 2002. (JE)

**Lewis's Woodpecker** The nest hole used by a pair since at least 1999 was expropriated by the resident pair of American Kestrels before the woodpeckers returned in May. Due to the height and increasing fragility of the dead snag, the usurpation had the tacit support of the observer. However, two active new nests were located in the same general area of West Ash Canyon SE of Crawford, Dawes Co. On 21 June 2002 one nest held a single egg, plus 5 young ranging from 1-5 days old. On 22 June 2002 the other nest held 7 eggs. (WM)

**Red-headed Woodpecker** A nest with 3 eggs and 3 young was found 7 mi. S of Redington, Morrill Co. on 22 June 2002. (WM)

**Red-bellied Woodpecker** A nest still under construction on 19 April 2002 was occupied on 26 April. It was found occupied by a pair of European Starlings on 12 May. This nest is not the nest mentioned in the account under European Starling listed below. (WM)

**Downy Woodpecker** A nest with 4 young about 1 week old was found 25 May 2002 at ICSP, Nemaha Co. (WM)

**Hairy Woodpecker** A nest near the picnic area / campground in West Ash Canyon 10 mi. SE of Crawford, Dawes Co., held both eggs and young when discovered on 1 June 2002. By 21 June only a single young remained in the nest. (WM)

**Pileated Woodpecker** Birds were reported in Indian Cave SP in late Feb. 2002 (DS) and apparently breeding by 18 May. (ADS) On 25-26 May a pair of adults was observed feeding young, with 1-2 young at a time sticking their heads out of the hole to be fed. On the latter date, the young appeared to be almost fully grown. By 16 June the woodpeckers had fledged and the hole was occupied by a pair of bats with at least 2 young. (WM) The hole was located 38 ft. up a 100-ft. tall dead cottonwood snag. This appears to be the second detailed nest report in the state.

**Western Wood-Pewee** A nest with 2 eggs was located in West Ash Canyon, 10 mi. SE of Crawford, Dawes Co., on 21 June 2002. (WM) Another nest with 3 eggs was located 8 mi. S of Redington, Morrill Co., on 22 June 2002. (WM)

**Yellow-bellied Flycatcher** Thanks to Dr. Rosalind Morris, former editor of *The Nebraska Bird Review*, Dr. Norma Johnson's original field notes were found and made available for study. Her extensive notes that formed the basis for the report of nesting Yellow-bellied Flycatchers that appeared in the 1978 nesting report by Esther Bennett were included. Douglas A. Gross, author of the species account in the *The Birds of North America: Life Histories for the 21st Century* series agreed to review the notes. He felt that the notes did indeed describe an *Empidonax* flycatcher but did not conclusively prove that it was a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. His concerns included: 1) Dr. Johnson did not state how she decided one of the birds was the male (since the sexes look alike); 2) she did not describe the location of the nest (a key component of identification of nesting *Empidonax*); and 3) there was not enough detail in the description of the birds themselves, or their calls, to conclusively rule out other similar species. His final comment was that the description and habitat made it seem more likely that it was a pair of Pacific-slope, or western Cordilleran Flycatchers, (which would also have been

equally far out of range), and that it was unfortunate that Dr. Johnson is no longer available to provide additional details.

**Say's Phoebe** A nest with a single egg was found in an abandoned shed 3 mi. NE of Marsland, Dawes Co., on 2 June 2002. (WM)

**Cassin's Kingbird** Two nests were found 8 mi. S of Redington, Morrill Co., on 22 June 2002. One nest held 1 egg and 3 young, the other held 4 young. (WM)

**Western Kingbird** Four nests found 22 June 2002, also 8 mi. S of Redington, Morrill Co., ranged in development from eggs and newly hatched young through nearly-fledged young. (WM)

**Eastern Kingbird** An interesting finding was nearly synchronous nesting across the state, with egg-laying underway near Ceresco in both Lancaster and Saunders Co. on 19 June 2002, and incubation underway in Morrill Co. 8 mi. S of Redington on 22 June 2002, and at Willy Lake near Bingham, Sheridan Co., on 23 June. (WM)

**Loggerhead Shrike** A nest with eggs was under incubation near Ceresco, Saunders Co., on 14 June 2002. On 3 July it held young, 3-5 days old. (WM) Three young were being fed by adults in Blaine Co. 10 mi. N of Brewster on 27 July 2002. (DS)

**Blue Jay** An adult incubating 2 eggs was fed while on the nest in Ashland, Saunders Co., on 30 April 2002. Three more nests with eggs, also in Ashland, were found on 12 May 2002. (WM)

**Black-billed Magpie** After a fruitless search on a chilly, damp day for the current Pinyon Jay breeding colony, the remaining time available was spent collecting information on a colony of magpies. Six nests were found 11 May 2002 in an area of 80 acres – more widely spaced than the usual placement of the jays' nests. All 6 nests held eggs, but only 2 were being incubated, with both of the incubating birds leaving the nest only after some prodding. The colony was located 7 mi. S. of Redington, Morrill Co. (WM) On 28 May 2002 a nest with eggs was located 9 mi. NE of North Bend, Dodge Co. (DP,JP). At Ft. Robinson SP, Sioux Co., on 1 June 2002, one nest contained half-grown young, and the young from an adjacent nest had already fledged. (WM)

**Horned Lark** Fledged young were noted in Sioux Co. on 6 May 2002, 14 mi. N of Scottsbluff (HH), and on 8 June 2002, 13 mi. SW of Harrison. (HH)

**Tree Swallow** Several weeks earlier than the Violet-green Swallows noted above, 5 nest boxes with eggs were noted on 26 May 2002 at Twin Lakes WMA 12 mi. SE of Seward, Seward Co. By 9 June young were present in 4 of the nests. (LB)

**Violet-green Swallow** Nest-building by the female was underway in a tree cavity in West Ash Canyon 10 mi. SE of Crawford, Dawes Co., on 31 May 2002. On 22 June the female was incubating 5 eggs. Also on 31 May, construction was underway in a nearby cliff cavity, but it was abandoned by 22 June. (WM)

At the WHNC, 8 mi. S of Gering, Scotts Bluff and Banner Cos., at least 2 nest boxes with eggs were noted on 15 June 2002. On 2 July, small young were noted in both boxes. (HW)

**Northern Rough-winged Swallow** A colony of 6-8 pairs was found in Indian Cave, in Indian Cave SP, Richardson Co., nesting on open ledges and shallow cavities in the stone walls of the cave, a setting quite at odds with their usual earthen riverbank nest sites. On 26 May 2002 one nest with 3 eggs was already being incubated, while other nests were still under construction. On 16 June the nest held 4 young that were several days old, while another nest held 2 eggs. The

other nests were less accessible and could not be checked without excessive disturbance. (WM)

**Bank Swallow** A colony was found in vertical hard-packed sand “blowout” walls in a gently rolling upland shortgrass prairie pasture miles from any surface water, 7 mi. SW of Harrison, Sioux Co. On 31 May 2002, 9 of the 16 holes were occupied, with nest-building underway in some of the holes. On 21 June one of the nests held eggs and young, while the other 8 nests held only eggs. (WM) As with the just-mentioned Rough-winged Swallows, this setting is very different from the usual nest sites found elsewhere in the state, but is similar to some other sites reported in the western Panhandle. (HH)

**Red-breasted Nuthatch** A pair of adults was noted carrying food to a cavity with 2-3-day-old young in West Ash Canyon, 12 mi. SE of Crawford, Dawes Co., on 10 May 2002. On 7 June the fledged, begging young were seen being fed by the adults in the nest tree. At the same time, a pair of House Wrens was busy building a twig nest in the recently-vacated cavity. (WM)

**White-breasted Nuthatch** In Ashland, Saunders Co., on 26 April 2002, an adult was seen carrying food to its incubating mate in a natural cavity used by Black-capped Chickadees 2 years previously. On 28 April the cavity held 7 eggs and an incubating bird that would not leave the cavity. On 4 May the nest held at least 4 just-hatched young and 2 eggs. (WM) Five young in a nest box were banded at Elkhorn, Douglas Co., on 14 June 2002. (DS)

**Pygmy Nuthatch** On 10 May 2002 a newly-excavated nest cavity 12 mi. SE of Crawford, Dawes Co., held an incomplete clutch of 4 eggs. The eggs were covered over with fluffy nest material when found. (WM)

**Brown Creeper** Apparently the first report of an active nest for the Panhandle, a nest with week-old young was found in West Ash Canyon 10 mi. SE of Crawford, Dawes Co., on 1 June 2002. (WM) Creepers have previously been reported breeding only in the middle Niobrara Valley and at the east end of the state, and only a single active nest has actually been found at each location. Breeding season birds exhibiting various breeding-related behaviors have been found in the Pine Ridge previously, and it was long believed to be the most likely area of the state for regular nesting. Given their inconspicuous habits, rather early nesting, and invisible nests, they may breed more frequently than suspected in this area.

**Rock Wren** A nest with 2 eggs was found on 24 July 2002, in Sioux Co. 11 mi. N of Scottsbluff. (HH)

**Marsh Wren** Wrens were numerous in the cattail marsh surrounding Willy Lake, 2 mi. SE of Bingham, Sheridan Co. On 2 June 2002 three nearly completed nests were found, along with 3-4 times that number of “dummy” nests. On 23 June one of the nests held 4-5 young that were less than a week old. (WM)

**Eastern Bluebird** A pair was noted hanging around a nest box in Seward Co. by 12 March 2002, possibly adding nest material. The nest was completed by 31 March and held 4 eggs on 5 Apr. (LB, WM) A nest in a pine snag in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co., held 5 eggs on 10 May 2002. (WM) Another in a nest box at Albion, Boone Co., held 5 eggs on 17 April 2002. (CN) A nest box at the WHNC, Scotts Bluff Co., held 5 young on 15 May 2002. (HW)

**Mountain Bluebirds** A nest box in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co., held 2 eggs on 10 May 2002. (WM)

**Townsend’s Solitaire** The report of a pair at a nest on 10 April 2002 at the WHNC, Scotts Bluff Co., proved to be a false alarm. Nesting activity was not

observed and the birds were not seen again. (HW,SW)

**European Starling** A pair nested again in Ashland, Saunders Co., in a willow snag cavity that was usurped from a pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers last year. The nest held at least 3 young on 12 May 2002. (WM)

**Cedar Waxwing** Nest building was observed at Medicine Ck Res., Frontier Co., on 30 June 2002. (RH,LR)

**Summer Tanager** Rarely reported with nesting details previously, a pair was found attending a nest at ICSP, Richardson Co. The nest held 1 egg and 2 small young on 28 June 2002. (WM)

**Lark Sparrow** A nest with 4 eggs was reported in Sioux Co. 12 mi. N of Scottsbluff on 13 June 2002. Young were seen beside the nest on 29 June. (HH)

**Lark Bunting** A nest with 5 eggs was found in Sioux Co. on 5 June 2002, 14 mi. NNE of Scottsbluff. (HH)

**Black-headed Grosbeak** A pair was observed nest-building in West Ash Canyon, Dawes Co. on 2 June 2002. By 22 June the nest had been abandoned. On 21 June 2002 another nest that held 4 young was found nearby. (WM)

**Yellow-headed Blackbird** In another example of synchronous nesting across the state, a colony with 7 nests was found near Lakeside, Sheridan Co., on 2 June 2002. Four nests were near completion, while the other 3 each held a single egg. (WM) Another colony at Willy Lake, near Bingham, Sheridan Co., on the same date ranged from nests nearing completion to just-hatched young. (WM) A colony of 9 nests in the Saunders Co. portion of Jack Sinn WMA, Saunders & Lancaster Cos., ranged from initial stages of nest-building to nests with 3 eggs on 5 June 2002. (WM)

**Brewer's Blackbird** A colony of 8 nests was found on 31 May 2002, 12 mi. E of Harrison, Sioux Co. The contents ranged from eggs to eggs and just-hatched young in the same nest. (WM)

**Common Grackle** A colony of 6 nests was found on 3 May 2002 in Lincoln, Lancaster Co. Activity ranged from nearly-complete nests to nests with eggs. (WM) Another colony of 9 nests was located on 11 May 2002 near Alda, Hall Co. Eight of the nests held only eggs, while 1 nest had eggs and just-hatched young. (WM) A nest in Shelton, Buffalo Co., held 3 eggs on 16 June 2002. (MM)

**Great-tailed Grackle** A colony was again active at Jack Sinn WMA near Ceresco, Saunders & Lancaster Cos. Nest-building was noted in the Saunders Co. portion of the WMA on 4 May 2002, eggs were noted on 14 May, and young were noted on 5 June. Some early nests were scavenged as sources for building materials and incorporated into later nests. (WM)

**Brown-headed Cowbird** Eggs were noted in Chipping Sparrow and House Finch nests (WM) and a young cowbird was noted being fed by a Lark Bunting. (HH)

**Bullock's Oriole** A nest with 1 egg and 3 just-hatched young was found on 22 June 2002, 9 mi. SW of Redington, Morrill Co. (WM)

**House Finch** A nest with 2 House Finch eggs, a House Sparrow egg, and a Brown-headed Cowbird egg was noted on 27 April 2002 in Ashland, Saunders Co. (WM)

**Pine Siskin** Adults were noted feeding just-fledged, begging young in Bassett, Rock Co., on 21 May 2002. (CH)

**House Sparrow** Two nests with eggs were noted on 28 April 2002 at Mahoney SP, Cass Co. (WM)