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## NESTING BIRDS OF THE CRESCENT LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Roger S. Sharpe and Raphael R. Payne

The Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge is located in Garden County near the heart of the Nebraska Sandhill Lakes Region. This country is principally rolling mid-grass prairie, the hills reaching a height of as much as 200 feet above the wet meadows. A good portion of the refuge's 46,000 acres consists of these lush meadows which are pocked by marshes, potholes and small lakes. Natural drainage from the surrounding sandhills and springs in the basins feed these water bodies.

The lakes are quite shallow, reaching a depth of perhaps 15 feet. They are alkaline yet are not so highly basic as to inhibit biological production. Aquatic plants and animal life flourish, supporting good fish populations. Surrounding these lakes are extensive marshes in which grow various species of emergent plants. All of these conditions combine to create ideal nesting habitat for aquatic and water-oriented birds.

The surrounding prairie is rich in grassland birds. The few trees and low brush which occur in isolated draws and occasionally on some lake shores harbor the few arboreal species present.

The observers spent five days (June 7-11, 1965) during the peak of the breeding season on the refuge. During this stay, time was spent surveying the refuge and its abundant birdlife. The greater part of one day was spent with a refuge staff member in a jeep, traveling into areas not accessible by car. Another day was spent in a boat on one of the major refuge lakes, Smith Lake. The remainder of the time was spent driving through the refuge and in its vicinity observing birds. Refuge manager, John Wilbrecht, deserves thanks for providing the boat and other transportation through the refuge.

Smith Lake was rather extensively surveyed. Relative number of breeding pairs of various species was estimated from number of nests located and nest contents were noted where possible.

The following is the result of the Smith Lake survey:

Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) This species was found nesting on the nesting platforms erected primarily for Canada geese. Four platforms were occupied by an estimated 35 breeding pairs. Two platforms supported a total of 17 active nests (nine and eight, respectively). The nests contained an average of 2.6 eggs (1 and 4, extremes). One young was just emerging from the egg. No other eggs were seen to be pipped.

Eared Grebe (*Podiceps caspicus*) This species nested in colonies containing 20 to 100 nests. The nests consisted of mats of floating vegetation on which the eggs were laid. We observed the incubating adult covering the eggs with vegetation as we approached. The 17 nests examined contained an average of 2.8 eggs (1 and 4, extremes). No young were observed. An estimated 400 breeding pairs of Eared Grebes resided on Smith Lake, nesting in approximately eight colonies.

Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax Nycticorax*) This was the only heron species observed in the area. It was abundant on the larger water bodies and upon close observation could be seen stalking among the reeds of any lake. Smith Lake appeared to contain the major nesting colonies. It was difficult to determine whether these were just small colonies or one large one, as they seemed to nest in almost every large cane (*Phragmites*) stand. It was estimated that at least 150 pairs were nesting

on Smith Lake. The nests were well-built of pieces of cane and other aquatic reeds, being built from the water level up to a height of about a foot. Of the 19 nests examined, 13 had eggs only, averaging 3.3 eggs per nest. The other six ranged from one egg and one young to a total of three young. One nest contained two eggs and three young. The young varied in age from newly emerged to as much as an estimated twelve to fifteen days old.

American Coot (*Fulica americana*) Two nests of this species were found. Both were well-constructed of reeds in clumps of *Phragmites*. They were constructed to a height of about a foot above water level. One nest contained nine eggs and the other seven. No estimate was made regarding the number nesting on the lake. These birds were quite secretive, stealing off into the vegetation as one approached.

Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*) Several hundred Forster's Terns were present on Smith Lake. Although many exhibited territorial behavior as we moved through the reeds, only one nest, containing three eggs, was found. This was located on what appeared to be an abandoned muskrat lodge.

Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*) This species was equally as abundant as Forster's Tern on Smith Lake. The only nest examined contained two eggs. Both tern species were commonly seen feeding on all the refuge lakes. However, the Black Tern appeared to be present in somewhat larger numbers throughout the refuge.

Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixean*) Approximately thirty pairs were nesting on Smith Lake. The birds appeared to nest in a loose colony among the less dense emergent vegetation. The two nests found, each containing two eggs, consisted of shallow depressions in piles of vegetative debris.

Other birds found nesting on or in the vicinity of the refuge, but not on Smith Lake:

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) Several broods were seen on the larger refuge lakes. Nest platforms have been constructed on these lakes specifically for these geese. A resident flock has been maintained on the refuge for a number of years, the offspring being left unpinioned. The flock has increased in number, and many of the birds resulting from the original stock return each year to nest. These geese are of uncertain lineage, appearing somewhat smaller than *B. c. maxima*, the probable subspecies that nested in the sandhill lakes region originally.

Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*) A single nest of this species was found on a small island in a pothole near the western edge of the refuge. It contained eleven eggs. Very few Canvasbacks were seen on the refuge. Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) A destroyed nest containing the partial remains of one young was found nine miles south and one mile east of refuge headquarters on Blue Creek. The nest was approximately forty feet above the ground in a cottonwood tree. The nest was apparently destroyed by wind. The remains of the young now constitutes a specimen (ZM10877) in the zoology collections of the Nebraska State Museum, Lincoln.

American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*) Although avocets were found on almost every small pond throughout the refuge, only two nests were found. Each contained two eggs. Undoubtedly many other nests were overlooked, since nearly all of the avocets encountered exhibited territorial aggression as one walked in their vicinity.

Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) This shorebird was very common in the moist meadows and around the small potholes throughout the refuge. The single nest, found at the edge of the

main refuge access road, contained four eggs.

Great-horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) Two half-grown young were found near the nest in a grove of cottonwoods near the western edge of the refuge. These were the only owls seen on the refuge.

Long-billed Marsh Wren (*Telmodytes palustris*) This wren was quite common in marshy cane and cattail stands, especially those found near the edge of larger bodies of water. Although difficult to see, singing males could be heard in nearly all of the larger stands. The single "oven-like" nest examined contained four eggs. This nest was located in reeds near Smith Lake.

Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) Both the Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds were common around the marshes and lakes. The Yellow-headed appeared to be more common than the Red-wing. As is generally the rule, the Yellow-headed was found nesting in emergent vegetation over water. The one nest checked contained three eggs.

Other birds seen and presumed breeding, but of which no nests were found:

Western Grebe (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) About forty adults were observed at most times on Smith Lake. One individual, found by scanning the lake with binoculars from a nearby hill, appeared to be incubating on a pile of debris. This nest was not located while surveying the lake by boat. Refuge Manager Wilbrecht indicated that Smith Lake was one of the main breeding areas for this bird on the refuge and that broods have been successfully reared on this lake in past years. Individuals were also seen on other major refuge lakes.

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) Several were seen on the marshy edges of the larger lakes. It could not be considered common.

Common Mallard (*Anas platyrhyn-*

*chos*) The mallard was common on most potholes. Although no broods were seen during the survey, refuge personnel had seen them.

Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) Every large pothole contained a pair.

American Pintail (*Anas acuta*) Pintails were occasionally seen. Several downy young were taken in a duck trap earlier in the season (May) by refuge personnel.

Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) This was one of the most common duck species on the refuge. Refuge personnel had found several clutches during this season. No broods had yet been sighted this season, however.

Shoveller (*Spatula clypeata*) The Shoveller was nearly as abundant as the Blue-wing.

Redhead (*Aythya americana*) Several pairs of Redheads were seen on nearly every large body of water.

Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) Ruddy Ducks were present in relatively large numbers on most large bodies of water. Males appeared in peak breeding condition.

Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) A single female of this species was flushed on Blue Creek approximately nine miles south and one mile east of refuge headquarters. This species may breed in suitable areas where trees with nesting cavities are present. The area where this bird was seen contained several large cottonwoods on the creek banks.

Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) This hawk was fairly common and was the only buteo seen in the area. Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Pediacetes phasianellus*) Several were flushed in meadows. This species far outnumbered the Prairie Chicken in this area. Occasionally a male Prairie Chicken is seen on Sharptail dancing grounds in the spring. Several hybrids between these species have been recorded in the area (Wilbrecht, pers. comm.).

Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*) This magnificent shorebird

was found in nearly every meadow. Many adults exhibited territorial behavior indicating probable nesting, while others were observed feeding in small groups. As many as thirteen were seen in one group.

Upland Plover (*Bartramia longicauda*) This sandpiper was quite common in all of the meadows of the area. Its characteristic call could be heard nearly everywhere. A nest of this species was found this season by refuge personnel.

Willet (*Catophthorus semipalmatus*) Although not as common as the curlew, territorial adult Willets were occasionally encountered. No nests were found, but the behavior of the adults suggested that breeding territories were established.

Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) This species is not listed in the Revised Checklist of Nebraska Birds (Rapp, et al, 1958) as a breeder in Nebraska. However, small numbers were encountered on all of the larger lakes. While surveying Smith Lake, several exhibited territorial behavior, but no nests were found.

Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*) Mourning Doves were common and undoubtedly nest on the ground in the absence of trees and shrubs. Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) This bird was common around refuge headquarters where the many trees and shrubs offered suitable nesting habitat.

Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) Common in the vicinity of refuge headquarters.

Horned Lark (*Erimophila alpestris*) This bird was probably the most abundant passerine in this area. Individuals were constantly flushed as one drove through the refuge.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) A number were seen around the buildings of refuge headquarters.

Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*) The Yellowthroat was the only parulid seen in the refuge vicinity and was occasionally encountered in the tall

reeds and grass in and around pot-holes.

Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) Bobolinks were locally common in some meadows. The males were exhibiting territorial singing, suggesting breeding populations.

Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*)

Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*) Both meadowlark species were present in the area. No determinations were made of the relative numbers of each species.

Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*) This fringillid was very common especially in the uplands. Individuals were seen carrying nesting material.

Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) Several singing males were observed.

Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) This sparrow was abundant throughout the sandhill grassland.

Crescent Lake refuge is a wonderful birding area, but is of difficult access. From the north the refuge may be reached by a single-lane black-top road from Lakeside on Highway 2. The trip is about 25 miles and takes an hour or better because of road-surface conditions.

From the south the refuge may be reached by a county gravel (sand) road from Oshkosh. This trip is also about 25 miles. At present this road should not be taken during or following heavy rain. Refuge personnel do not attempt to travel this under adverse conditions even with four-wheel drive vehicles except in emergencies.

Presently no campsites or overnight accommodations are available at the refuge. Picnic facilities do exist on several of the larger lakes, however. No motels or hotels are available at Lakeside or Ellsworth near the northern approach, but such accommodations are available at Oshkosh.

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