

12-1995

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Tomback, Diana F., "A Possible Breeding Record for Clark's Nutcracker" (1995). *Nebraska Bird Review*. 860.
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A POSSIBLE BREEDING RECORD FOR CLARK'S NUTCRACKER IN
NORTHWESTERN NEBRASKA IN 1987

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In the late morning of 17 May, 1987, my husband and I drove into Sowbelly Canyon, which is in the Pine Ridge area of northwestern Nebraska. In the canyon, about 3.3 miles from Harrison, we were in a ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*)-riparian community ecotone, and were startled to hear and see a flock of Clark's Nutcrackers (*Nucifraga columbiana*). About 30 adults were perched on branches or flying about the tops of the ponderosa pines. From the abundance of cones, it was clear that there had been a good seed crop the previous fall. Some of the birds were perched on or near cones, sorting through the scales and removing seeds. I saw similar foraging behavior by Clark's Nutcrackers in Jeffrey pines (*Pinus jeffreyi*) during winter and spring in the eastern Sierra Nevada, California (Tomback 1978).

At the top of a ponderosa pine, a young nutcracker was begging with the characteristic hunger call (aaa-aaa-aaa) and wing fluttering (Mewaldt 1956, Tomback 1978). An adult, presumably a parent, removed seeds from cones nearby in the same tree, paused after a few minutes, went to the young bird and fed it, then resumed foraging for seeds. I watched the interaction with binoculars and noticed that the insides of the mouth of the young bird were pink and that the plumage was definitely fluffy and juvenal buffy-gray (Mewaldt 1958). There was at least one more feeding bout before the two birds moved on through the forest.

The young bird was probably out of the nest not more than a few weeks, if that long. The insides of the bill gradually turn black during the postnatal and postjuvinal molts (Mewaldt 1956). Since the nestling period is about 20 days and incubation is 18 days, the eggs were probably laid in late March or early April (see Mewaldt 1956). I do not believe that it is possible for a bird so young to be hatched within the main breeding range of Clark's Nutcracker. The birds probably overwintered in the area in response to the abundant ponderosa pine seed crop. This is supported by the observation of Richard C. Rosché (pers. comm. 1996) that Clark's Nutcrackers moved into western Nebraska in winter, 1987; a flock of 71 were in the two Hat Canyons east of Sowbelly Canyon on 7 February, 1987.

Nutcracker eruptions from the main range have been well-documented. These movements are believed to occur in response to regional failures of their primary conifer seed sources (Davis and Williams 1957, 1964, Fisher and Myres 1979, Vander Wall et al. 1981). Peterson (1988) described an invasion of nutcrackers into the southern Black Hills in late August, 1986. He documented the first nesting record by the species for South Dakota in April, 1987. His observations, as well as mine in Sowbelly Canyon, suggest that the 1986-1987 invasion was regional.

There is the possibility that the Sowbelly Canyon nutcracker family had recently moved south from the Black Hills. This is unlikely for several reasons. The state boundary is about 40 miles north of Harrison, and it is doubtful that a family group would move so far with such a young bird. If travel did occur, it would be very slow since the juveniles must be fed regularly (Tomback 1977, 1978). Also, the habitat between the Black Hills and the Pine Ridge area is unsuitable for a family group, with "prickly pear and buffalo grass" (Wayne Mollhoff, pers. comm. 1989). R.C. Rosché (pers. comm. 1996) pointed out that the family group could have come from the pine ridge region of eastern Wyoming. In general, nutcracker family groups tend to have a home range in which the parents stored seed caches the previous fall (Tomback 1978). They recover these seed caches from winter through summer months, often feeding their young with retrieved seeds (Tomback 1978, Vander Wall and Hutchins 1983).

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I thank Wayne Mollhoff for his comments on an earlier draft and his encouragement to publish these observations. I also thank R.C. Rosché for sharing his observations on the invasion of 1987.

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