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Wayne Mollhoff

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THE 2006 NEBRASKA NEST REPORT

Wayne J. Mollhoff
2354 Euclid St.
Ashland NE 68003

The drought that began in 1999 continued over most of Nebraska this year, with 7 of the past 8 years receiving lower than normal rainfall. More normal rains fell in April and early May, especially in the central and east, before stopping for most of the summer. Most of the Panhandle and southwest were declared drought disaster areas by early summer, setting the stage in late July for the worst fire season in memory in the Pine Ridge area of the northern Panhandle (Fowler, 2007). Ultimately, 83 of 93 counties were declared part of the drought disaster area. Low water levels made for a disastrous breeding season for waterbirds in the western Sandhills, and with mid-summer finding many potholes and ponds dry or nearly so, it appeared that many waterbirds either left or just "hung out" for the season.

With the Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas Project II getting underway this year, many more records of breeding were received than could be reported here in detail. Well over 500 nests were reported, involving 122 species from 54 counties around the state. Despite the increase in reports, there remain gaps in the information available about many of our breeding birds. Details about when nest-building begins, egg dates, dates and age of young in the nest, fledging, how long the young are cared for after they leave the nest, habitat used, nest placement, etc., are still needed for nearly all species, and should be recorded and reported.

SPECIES

Species reported but not detailed in the accounts below include: Wood Duck, Mallard, Ring-necked Pheasant, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Greater Prairie-Chicken, Pied-billed Grebe, Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Mississippi Kite, Cooper's Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, American Coot, Piping Plover, Killdeer, American Avocet, Upland Sandpiper, Long-billed Curlew, Rock Pigeon, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Mourning Dove, Great Horned Owl, Burrowing Owl, Common Poorwill, Red-headed Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Phoebe, Great Crested Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, Eastern Kingbird, Bell's Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue Jay, Horned Lark, Cliff Swallow, Barn Swallow, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Pygmy Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, House Wren, Eastern Bluebird, Mountain Bluebird, American Robin, Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird, Brown Thrasher, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Western Tanager, Spotted Towhee, Cassin's Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, Lark Bunting, Northern Cardinal, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Dickcissel, Red-winged Blackbird, Eastern Meadowlark, Brewer's Blackbird, Common Grackle, Baltimore Oriole, House Finch, Pine Siskin, American Goldfinch, and House Sparrow.

OBSERVERS

Reports were received from the following observers: Virginia Correa (VC), Kathy DeLara (KD), Stephen J. Dinsmore (SD), Bill Glenn (BG), Bob Grier (BGr), Joseph Gubanyi (JG), Helen Hughson (HH), Bill Huser (BH), Jan Johnson (JJ), Alice Kenitz (AK), Clem Klaphake (CK), Clarence Mertins (CM), Wayne Mollhoff (WM), Betsy Mulliken (BM), Jerry Mulliken (JM), Emily Munter (EM), Lucas Negus (LN), Colleen Noecker (CN), Don Paseka (DP), Janis Paseka (JP), Allen Reyer (AR), David Stage (DS), Pat Stewart (PS), and Thomas Walker (TW).

ABBREVIATIONS

SP – State Park

SRA – State Recreation Area

WMA – Wildlife Management Area

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Trumpeter Swan A pair with 4 cygnets was seen on a small lake 36 mi S of Merriman, Cherry Co., on 8 June 2006 (CK). Another pair with 3 young was noted on a marshy lake 5.5 mi W of Merriman, Cherry Co., on 16 August 2006 (WM).

Wild Turkey A nest with 11 eggs that had been recently destroyed by a mammalian predator was found on 3 May 2006 at Oak Valley WMA 3 mi S of Battle Creek, Madison Co. A hen was flushed off a nest with 10 eggs at Sherman Reservoir SRA, 3 mi NE of Loup City, Sherman Co., on 13 May 2006 (WM). A hen with two late-hatched young “that couldn’t have been more than three weeks old” was noted at Bellevue, Sarpy Co., on the late date of 6 November 2006 (AR).

Green Heron A nesting colony (rather than the usual solitary nests), apparently the first colony reported in Nebraska, was found on 17 May 2006 at Two Rivers SRA, a mile S of Venice, Douglas Co. Nests with 3, 5, 5, and 5 eggs were examined. Several other nests that also appeared to be active were inaccessible (WM).

Turkey Vulture Two downy young were found in a barn 5 mi E of Seward, Seward Co., on 21 July 2006. The ‘nest’ was apparently in the hayloft, from which the young had fallen before being discovered by the owner (CM, JG).

Bald Eagle An adult was adding material to a nest on the Platte River near Clarks, Merrick Co., on 2 March 2006. An adult was incubating eggs or brooding young on 19 April; young were being fed on 14 June and still present on 26 June (WM). A nest on the Platte River near Hwy 75, Cass Co., was occupied on 23 April 2006. By 15 May movement by what appeared to be small young was noted, with nearly full-grown young noted jumping around on the nest by 10 June. Young were noted on the nest until 12 July (CK).

Northern Harrier A pair was noted nest-building in May 2006 at Kiowa WMA, 3 mi S of Morrill, Scotts Bluff Co. On 26 June one young was found in the nest, while 2 others were exploring the area nearby (KD).

- Ferruginous Hawk** A pair occupying a nest used the previous year were noted feeding two young on 22 June 2006 in northern Box Butte Co. (BG).
- Golden Eagle** Adults were seen carrying sticks to a nest located 60 ft. up a cliff in southern Sioux Co. about 15 mi N of Scottsbluff, on 15 March 2006. On 15 April an adult was noted brooding, and on 23 April "tiny, white babies" were seen. The area was hit by a severe storm on 24-25 April, and the young were not seen when the site was visited on 5 May. By 12 May the adults had left the nest area (HH).
- Sandhill Crane** A pair with 2 young was found on 18 July 2006 at Facus Springs WMA, Morrill Co. Flight was noted on 4 August for the larger chick and on 16 August for the smaller chick (EM, BGr). (Grier, 2007)
- Marbled Godwit** Pairs displaying typically aggressive defense of territory were found ~10 mi WSW of Wood Lake, Cherry Co., on 17 June 2006 (BH) and ~6 mi NW of Whitney, Dawes Co., on 20 June 2006 (WM). These are the first indications of breeding away from Sheridan Co., which is the location of the 3 previous reports of breeding and is about 100 mi. away from either of the new locations (Mollhoff 2005; Sharpe et al. 2001). Based on these reports, observers should be alert for possible breeding almost anywhere in the grasslands of western and northern Nebraska.
- Forster's Tern** Beem Lake, at Avocet WMA, 2 mi E of Hyannis, Grant Co., had declining water levels this year, with most of the cattails and even some bulrush stands left high and dry. Instead of the usual 4-8 ft. water depth, when visited on 30 June 2006, the deepest water found was only 1 ft. deep. Six nests with 2, 2, 3, 3, 3, and 3 eggs, and a clutch of 3 swimming young about a week old were found on that date (WM).
- Black Tern** Also at Avocet WMA near Hyannis, Grant Co., on 30 June 2006, a nesting colony had 4 nests with 3 eggs each, another nest with a single egg and one just-hatched young, and a nest with 3 young that were several days old (WM).
- White-winged Dove** A single bird showed up on 27 April 2006 in the Albion, Boone Co., neighborhood where they nested last year. By 12 May it had begun a nest which was later abandoned. Finally, on 30 May, a second bird was seen, a nest was built, and by 26 July the pair was seen attending a young bird (CN).
- Barn Owl** A brood of 3 young was found in the empty attic of a school in Ulysses, Butler Co., on 24 July 2006 (JG). Another brood of 8 young was found beneath a highway bridge 2 mi N of Big Springs, Deuel Co., on 8 June 2006 (WM).
- Barred Owl** A pair were found in a nest box west of Elkhorn, Douglas Co., with 2 young less than a week old present on 20 April 2006. The young were about 10 in. tall when checked on 8 May (DS).
- Common Nighthawk** A nest with two eggs was found in a soybean field 5 mi NW of Powell, Jefferson Co., on 18 July 2006 (BG). Another bird was flushed from its nest ~15 mi N of Scottsbluff in southern Sioux Co. in July 2006, revealing a remarkably large clutch of 4 eggs (HH).
- Western Wood-pewee** On 8 June 2006 a bird was seen adding cottonwood 'cotton' to line its nest at Smith Lake WMA, about 20 mi S of Rushville, Sheridan Co. (CK).
- Willow Flycatcher** A nest with a single egg was found on 1 July 2006 on Minnechaduza Ck, 10 mi NW of Crookston, Cherry Co. (WM).
- Say's Phoebe** A nest on a ledge at Toadstool Geologic Park, Sioux Co., held 4 eggs on 21 June 2006. A nest in the stovepipe hole inside an abandoned

schoolhouse 20 mi SW of Whiteclay, Sheridan Co., held a single egg and at least 2 young on 27 June 2006. A nest underneath a bridge over a dry wash 1 mi W of Haigler, Dundy Co., held 6 eggs on 4 July 2006 (WM).

Cassin's Kingbird A nest in the ponderosa pines 7.5 mi S of Redington, Morrill Co. held 2 eggs on 9 June 2006 (WM).

Loggerhead Shrike In view of a range-wide population decline for the past several decades, it was gratifying to find a nest with 2 eggs and 3 just-hatched young a mile SE of Ceresco, Saunders Co., on 17 May 2006 in an intensively farmed area. Another welcome sight was a single fledged young, still bobtailed and with short primaries, on the edge of the 30,000-acre Thayer Fire 3 mi NE of Harrison, Sioux Co., on 16 August 2006 (WM).

Plumbeous Vireo An adult repeatedly fed a begging young bird that trailed it on 28 June 2006 in West Ash Creek Canyon 10 mi ESE of Crawford, Dawes Co. (WM).

Pinyon Jay The jay colony 8 mi SSW of Redington, Morrill Co., nested in the same site the colony used in 2001. Four active nests, with 4, 4, 4, and 5 eggs, were found within a half-hour on 17 April 2006. As usual with this tight-sitting species, none of the birds betrayed their presence until flushing after the observer had climbed to within a foot or two of the nest (WM).

Tree Swallow Routinely found in nest boxes now, a pair was nest-building at Mahoney SP, Cass Co., on 26 April 2006. Another such nest held 6 eggs at Two Rivers SRA, 1 mi S of Venice, Douglas Co., on 16 May 2006. Another female refused to leave her 5 eggs 1 mi S of Surprise, Butler Co., even when the box was opened and a finger gently lifted her to the side to check the clutch! A box on a fencepost bordering a Sandhills pasture 15 mi NW of Bartlett, Wheeler Co., held 5 eggs on 13 June 2006 (WM).

Northern Rough-winged Swallow A nest with 5 eggs was found in a road cutbank 5 mi SE of Crawford, Dawes Co., on 28 June 2006. Another nest with at least 3 young was found in a roadcut 9 mi S of Crawford on Breakneck Hill Road, Dawes Co., on 29 June 2006 (WM).

Bank Swallow A nest in a small colony found in a sandy roadcut in the arid sandsage prairie 26 mi W of Alliance, Box Butte Co., held at least 4 small young on 29 June 2006 (WM).

Brown Creeper Documenting one of the rare confirmations of nesting in Nebraska, a pair of adults was seen repeatedly carrying food into and then leaving from behind an area of raised bark on a dead tree at Neale Woods Nature Center, Washington/Douglas Cos., on 29 May 2006 (CK).

Marsh Wren On 8 June 2006 multiple males were busy building nests at Smith Lake WMA about 20 mi S of Rushville, Sheridan Co. (CK). A colony with 5 active and 17 'dummy' nests at Cottonwood Lake SRA a mile E of Merriman, Cherry Co., had clutches of 0, 1, 2, 4, and 4 eggs on 1 July 2006. A colony at Cottonwood-Steverson WMA 35 mi S of Merriman with about the same proportion of active vs. 'dummy' nests had clutches of 1, 3, 4, 4, 4, and 5 eggs on 30 June 2006 (WM).

Wood Thrush A bird was observed on its nest in Hormel Park, Fremont, Dodge Co., on 9 May 2006 (JP).

Sage Thrasher A pair of adults with a single fledged young was noted near the relict limber pine forest 12 mi SW of Bushnell, Kimball Co., on 25 July 2006. Another pair was found 2 miles away and another single adult was seen 4 miles away. Their presence on this date makes it seem possible that breeding took place somewhere in the vicinity. However, an active nest or flightless young have still not been documented in Nebraska (WM).

- European Starling** Four fully-feathered young in a nest at Two Rivers SRA a mile south of Venice, Douglas Co., appeared ready to fledge on 17 May 2006 (WM).
- Black-and-white Warbler** A recently-fledged begging young in West Ash Creek Canyon 11 mi ESE of Crawford, Dawes Co., was fed by an adult male 3 times in less than 30 seconds on 28 June 2006 (WM).
- Eastern Towhee** A ground nest found in a patch of bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) held 4 eggs when found on 20 May 2006 at Ponca State Park, Dixon Co. (DP,JP,BM,JM).
- Brewer's Sparrow** Adults were noted carrying food to young at multiple locations in the sandsage prairie area 27 mi W of Alliance, Box Butte Co., on 29 June 2006 (WM).
- Field Sparrow** A pair was observed building a nest on 11 June 2006 at Dead Timber SRA, 5 mi NW of Scribner, Dodge Co. (DP,JP). An agitated pair, both of them carrying food, was initially found in a patch of greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*), near Montrose Church, 26 mi NE of Harrison, Sioux Co., on 21 June 2006. Searching revealed a nest in some adjacent buckbrush (*Symphoricarpos* sp.) and the reason for the agitation: a green racer (*Coluber constrictor*) was pulling a day-old young sparrow through a hole in the bottom of the nest and literally racing away with it (WM).
- Henslow's Sparrow** A late report was received of four nests found in Stanton Co., 3 mi NE of Stanton in 2005. Nests with eggs were found on 22 and 28 June and 3 August 2005. One of the nests found on 22 June later fledged 3 young (LN).
- Swamp Sparrow** Perhaps only the second active nest reported in the state was one found at Lake McConaughy, Keith Co., which held 6 eggs on 11 June 2006 (SD).



Swamp Sparrow nest at Lake McConaughy Photo courtesy of Steven J. Dinsmore

- Dark-eyed (White-winged) Junco** A recently-fledged young bird was found following an adult in West Ash Creek Canyon 11 mi ESE of Crawford, Dawes Co., on 28 June 2006, continually begging for food (WM).
- Lazuli Bunting** A pair was found defending a nest alongside Breakneck Hill Road 8 mi S of Crawford, Dawes Co., on 29 June 2006. The nest was empty but for a single Brown-headed Cowbird egg (WM).
- Western Meadowlark** A nest of this superabundant bird (but one with infrequently reported nests) was found at Schlagel Creek WMA south of Valentine, Cherry Co., on 2 July 2006. It contained 2 eggs and 3 just-hatched young. Another nest found 3 mi NW of Cody, Cherry Co., on 1 July 2006 held 1 meadowlark egg and 1 Brown-headed Cowbird egg (WM).
- Yellow-headed Blackbird** A young bird at Avocet WMA, 2 mi E of Hyannis, Grant Co., just out of the nest on 30 June 2006, tried to fly across a 30-ft. stretch of open water. It splashed down about halfway across and was closely harassed (but not touched) by several diving Black Terns as it flapped and 'swam' the rest of the way across (WM).
- Great-tailed Grackle** Birds at the recently-established colony in the highway/railroad right-of-way 4 mi SW of Waverly, Lancaster Co., were just starting to build nests on 13 April 2006. Nests with eggs were noted by 25 April, and construction on other nests was still continuing on 1 May. A total of 12 nests was found. A colony with 2 nests at Jack Sinn WMA, 4 mi ESE of Ceresco, Saunders/Lancaster Cos., had eggs in the nests on 17 May 2006 (WM).
- Orchard Oriole** A nest with 3 oriole eggs, plus 5 Brown-headed Cowbird eggs, was found on 15 June 2006, 6 mi SE of Syracuse, Otoe Co. (WM).
- Red Crossbill** Adults were seen feeding young at Gordon, Sheridan Co., on 8 June 2006 (CK). A mixed-age flock of 12-15 birds was observed feeding in ponderosa pines 8 mi S of Redington, Morrill Co., on 9 June 2006. Adults were noted tearing open the new green cones, extracting seeds and feeding the begging young (CK, WM). Adults were seen with fledged young 10 mi N of Hay Springs, Sheridan Co., on 26 June and in West Ash Creek Canyon, 10 mi SE of Crawford on 28 June (WM).

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