
Canada Geese Nesting at Lake Texoma, Oklahoma¹

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Nice (2) speaks of the Canada Goose *Branta canadensis canadensis* as a common transient in Oklahoma in October and March and an irregular visitor in winter. No mention of nesting is made, nor could any record

¹Contribution of the University of Oklahoma Biological Station, Lake Texoma.

be found in the literature pertaining to the birds of Oklahoma and the southwest. Correspondence and personal contact with Dr. F. M. Baumgartner, Oklahoma A. and M. College; Dr. George M. Sutton, Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan; Mr. Earl Craven, Refuge Manager, Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge; Mr. John Van den Akker, Refuge Manager, Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge; and other ornithologists who have worked in Oklahoma, failed to disclose positive records of the nesting of normal, healthy, wild Canada Geese.

Baumgartner (correspondence) reported a 1946 nest of a pair of pinioned birds on the shore of one of the lakes at Mohawk Park, Tulsa County, Oklahoma. Van den Akker (correspondence) mentioned a nesting record near Salt Plains, Alfalfa County, and several records at Lake Texoma, Johnston County. The former records he believes to be due to crippled birds, the latter to decoy birds from the Hagerman and Tishomingo refuges. The decoy birds were brought from the Bear River Refuge by Van den Akker, and about 50 geese were pinioned and left at each of the Lake Texoma refuges. Some of the birds were poorly pinioned, or the feathers grew out again, and they escaped.

Craven (correspondence) reports several nesting records from Lake Texoma, but believes as Van den Akker, that the nesting geese are the semi-captive birds from the Bear River Refuge. After the first year of confinement, those birds that had not escaped were not kept in close confinement, and many of them spread around the lake.

Lake Texoma records of two Canada Goose nests in 1948, three in 1949, two in 1950, and five in 1951 are on file at the Tishomingo Refuge. Twelve birds from two broods are known to have hatched near the refuge headquarters, but most of the nests were destroyed by predation or high water. Since four juvenile birds were trapped and banded, following one nesting season, some of the goslings obviously survived. Craven believes these nesting birds to be the semi-captives, but recognizes the possibility that normal, migrant birds might have mated with them.

On April 22, 1951, during a visit to the most northwesterly island of an island chain approximately seven miles south and east of the University of Oklahoma Biological Station, Lake Texoma, Starks flushed three Canada Geese from the water's edge where they had apparently been feeding. The geese flew without calling to the open water west of the island. They did not seem to be greatly disturbed, but flew strongly with no evidence of clipped wings or of being crippled.

The island is low, sandy, and partially wooded. Its area is variable due to the great vertical fluctuation of the water level, but at the time the geese were seen it was approximately four acres. On the northwest side of the island a dense growth of Bermuda grass, *Cynodon dactylon*, borders the beach about 30 to 50 feet from the edge of the water. Other common plants of the island are black willow, *Salix nigra*, cottonwood, *Populus deltoides*, salt cedar, *Tamarix gallica*, fringed greenbrier, *Smilax Bona-nox*, and Johnson grass, *Norghum halapense*. The island habitat is suitable for the nesting of Canada Geese.

On May 12, 1951, Starks again visited the island and while walking along its northwest side recognized the head and long neck of a Canada Goose extending above a small Bermuda grass covered knoll about one yard above the bare beach. The bird permitted approach to within about 20 paces. It then evidenced its alarm and disturbance by calling loudly and flying to the open water where it was joined by its mate.

A search of the area where the goose was first seen revealed a nest containing five large, white eggs. The nest was in a shallow depression.

in the Bermuda grass in an open, unshaded area, high enough to afford a good view of the surrounding area to the nesting geese. The nest was made chiefly of Bermuda grass loosely packed together, and lined with a layer of soft, dull-gray down.

On the following day, May 13, Riggs visited the island. One goose was on the nest, the other near by in the Bermuda grass. They remained quiet and motionless as long as they were watched, the bird on the nest crouched low with neck outstretched in the grass, the other erect and attentive, and no attempt was made to disturb them. The rest of the island was then searched for additional nests. At the southeast end, two more geese were flushed from the edge of a thicket. Only two or three calls of alarm were given as the birds flew. They flew strongly, climbing rapidly and heading northwest. They flew until almost out of sight, then alighted in the Limestone Creek area. Although a careful search of the area was made, no nest was found.

Starks again visited the nest on May 17. This time the gander was first seen as he flew overhead toward open water at the northwest end of the island. The female was flushed from the nest and joined her mate on the water before the observers were within 35 paces of the nest. Both birds remained only a short distance off shore and maintained a continuous, clamorous honking while the nest was being inspected and photographed. The eggs had not hatched, but had changed color from a clean, creamy white to a dull, dirty white. There was no evidence that the nest had been disturbed.

On May 19, Mr. J. C. Mayfield of Norman, Oklahoma, discovered the goose nest described above. Other than looking at the nest and noting that it contained five eggs, he did not disturb it. The parent birds acted the same as they did for Starks earlier in the week. Mayfield, who is an experienced goose hunter, reported the flight to be strong and normal and not suggestive of previous crippling or pinioning. He did believe, however, that one of the birds, probably the gander, had a crippled leg.

At the southeast end of the island Mayfield flushed two geese from the same locality where Riggs had flushed them on May 13. No nest was found, but the birds flew reluctantly and noisily out to the water a short distance from shore where they swam about in circles keeping up a constant clamor of honking. They behaved like nesting birds.

On May 20, the lake began to rise due to very heavy rains throughout the watershed. By May 25, the lake level had raised almost ten feet (from 611.77 to 621.38 feet above sea level). The high water persisted throughout May, June, and early July.

Because of continued hard rain, high winds, and an absence from the area, the island was not again visited until May 30. Inaccessibility prevented examination of the nesting site. On this date, however, Riggs saw two parent birds with three goslings in a small inlet at the northwest end of the second island. This was within 500 yards of the nesting site. It is impossible to say with certainty whether these birds were the ones whose nest we observed on the first island, but it seems probable. Very possibly the second two birds seen at the southeast end of the first island could have nested and hatched young. Also other geese could have nested on the second island. Such nests very likely would have been discovered, however, by some of the Biological Station personnel who frequently visited and often thoroughly covered those first two islands. The parent birds and goslings were seen on the following day along the northeast shore of the first island. To our knowledge they were never seen again.

Whether these were semi-captive birds, wild birds, or a wild and a semi-captive bird that mated, is also impossible to determine. The fact

that their flight was strong and normal, and that their behavior showed no indication of captivity, would not of course offer positive proof of their wildness. That wild and apparently healthy geese do remain at Lake Texoma through the month of May can be proved, however. During the spring of 1949 wild Canada Geese were seen at Texoma by Riggs as late as June 4. In 1950, four Canada Geese, a Hutchin's Goose, and one Snow Goose frequented the shallow slough immediately south and west of the Biological Station, and the west shore of Limestone Creek as late as June 11. These birds were excellent flyers, and although they allowed relatively close approach, they were almost certainly wild birds.

Bent (1) gives nesting records of Canada Geese at Reelfoot Lake, Tennessee. Although considerably east of Lake Texoma, Reelfoot is only about 150 miles north. It is in the center of the great Mississippi Flyway and undoubtedly is visited by many more waterfowl, including the Canada Goose, during spring and fall migration. Large numbers of geese visit Texoma, however, both in spring and fall. It is quite possible that the creation of large bodies of water such as Lake Texoma throughout the southwest and middle west will lead to a southward extension of the nesting ranges of waterfowl. It has caused such a range extension for many approach, they were almost certainly wild birds.

LITERATURE CITED

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