

History of the House Finch in Oklahoma, 1919-1991

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Since 1919, house finches have gradually extended their known range eastward from the western Oklahoma panhandle. The earliest record for the main body of the state was in 1957. During the 1960s they appeared in several western counties, and by the early 1980s, reached central Oklahoma. Concurrently, a second population from the eastern U.S. was making its way westward; first records in several eastern counties in the late 1980s are thought to represent this population. By 1990, the populations probably converged in central Oklahoma. Nests occur in all three Panhandle counties, as well as Beckham, Comanche, and Woodward counties in the main body of the state.

INTRODUCTION

Because discrete populations of house finches west and east of Oklahoma are rapidly and simultaneously expanding toward the state, it is important to chronicle these movements both historically and temporally. Earlier notes on this subject are scattered throughout the literature and are often difficult to access. This information is collated here and current records are added.

METHODS

References to the house finch in Oklahoma were arranged chronologically to construct a history of invasions from either direction. Some unpublished sightings were added to complete the analysis.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Early History

The house finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*), a familiar western bird, was first reported from Oklahoma during the summer of 1919 near Kenton in Cimarron County at the west end of the Panhandle (1). By 1922, Tate had found several nests in that vicinity (1). House finches proliferated locally and were reported from Cimarron County irregularly until 1937 (2). A hiatus of published county records exists for the next 15 years. Since 1952, the species has been reported from Cimarron County virtually every year; its eastward progress to the Boise City area, about 25 miles, was not documented until 1957 (2). It was not reported from Texas County until 1981 and first found to nest there (in Goodwell) about 1982 (3); in June 1983, Shackford saw a singing male in Beaver, Beaver County, at the eastern end of the Panhandle (3).

According to Sutton's summary of bird records at the University of Oklahoma (2), the first report of this species outside Cimarron County was on 3 February 1957, when Sutton and others saw two (male, UOMZ No. 2908, collected) at Red Rock Canyon State Park in Caddo County, west central Oklahoma (Fig. 1). Within a few years, house finches had begun to appear at several locations, primarily in western Oklahoma. From 15 January to 6 May 1964, a small flock appeared in Elk City in Beckham County, and on 6 August 1964, a single female was seen in Harmon County in the southwestern corner of the state (2). One was found in central Oklahoma at Norman, Cleveland County, September 14, 1968, and in late winter of 1968-69, they were again observed in Beckham County (2).

In Jackson County, a male visited a feeder in Altus during January 1973 and a singing male was noted there in June 1979 (3). Fifty miles eastward, in Comanche County, the first known occurrence of this species was in Lawton during July 1978 (4). In February 1979, a male appeared in Grant County, north central Oklahoma (5). Not until the spring of 1983 was there a report from Clinton in Custer County, about 25 miles east of Elk City (3). The first Oklahoma County sighting was of a male in Oklahoma City in February 1984 (6). Woodward County observers also first encountered house finches in 1984 (pers. comm., Randy Hiatt). The earliest record for Stephens County was in December 1986, when they were seen near Duncan (7).

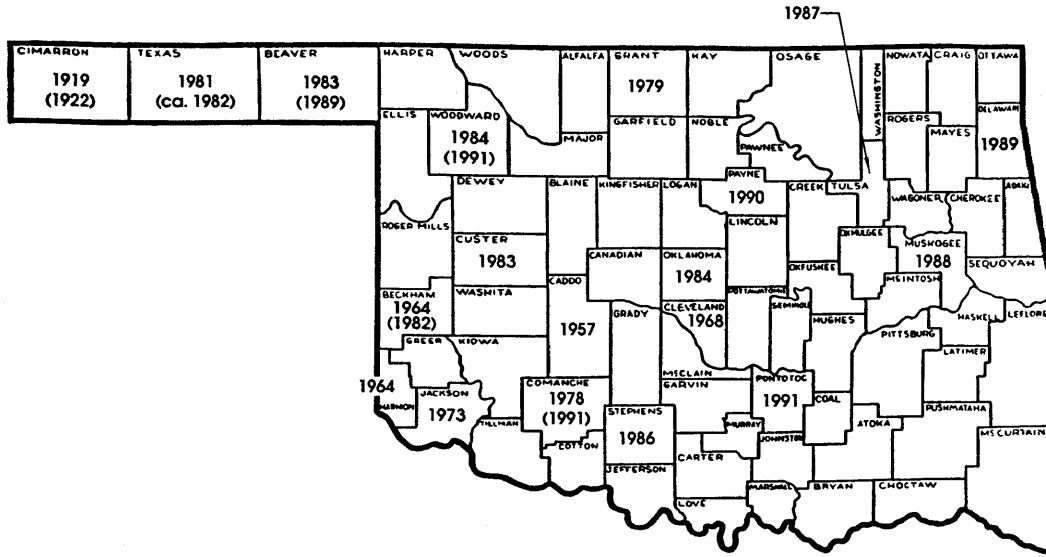


Figure 1. First year that the presence (nesting) of the house finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) was documented for each of various counties in Oklahoma.

Breeding Records

The house finch has now bred in all three counties of the Panhandle and there are seven nesting records for the main body of Oklahoma. Four of these nests were in Beckham County, two in Comanche County and one in Woodward County. In addition, young finches have been observed in Oklahoma County. Most of these records were given by Oliphant and Brown (3), who reported that between 1964 and 1979, house finches were regular visitants to Elk City in winter, that they apparently established themselves as residents about 1980, and that young birds were first seen at feeders that spring. Concerted efforts by Brown and others to locate a nest in Elk City failed (3). The first nest for Beckham County, as well as the main body of the state, was discovered in Erick, 30 miles to the southwest, in 1982; during 1983, two nests were found in Elk City (3, 9).

A report of a nest for Woodward County in May 1987 (8) could not be substantiated. House finches have brought young to feeders in Altus since at least 1985, although no nest has been discovered there (4, 9). At Optima Lake headquarters in eastern Texas County, a nest with at least three eggs was discovered in a cholla cactus on 25 June 1988 by Shackford (pers. comm.). A pair nested at Gate, Beaver County, a few miles inside the Panhandle during the spring of 1989 (pers. comm., L. Dunn).

A pair of house finches nested just 85 miles north of Woods County, Oklahoma, in Larned, Pawnee County, Kansas, in the spring of 1984 (10). In 1990, the first nest was reported for Wichita, Sedgwick County, south central Kansas (11), which is only about 45 miles from the Oklahoma border and due north of Oklahoma City. Because of the proximity of locations already known for both states, it seems probable that these were western birds.

A young bird was seen at a feeder in Oklahoma City during the summer of 1990 (pers. comm., N. Krosley). In April 1991, in Elk City, four young house finches fledged from a nest built in the same coconut half-shell in which the 1983 nest had been placed (9). In Lawton, Comanche County, about 60 miles to the east and 80 miles south of Elk City, the author found a house finch nest in a small pine on the Cameron University campus on 30 May 1991 (12). Although it was abandoned on or about 7 June, a second nest was discovered in the top of another pine not far away on 20 June. By 2 July, it contained four young nearly old enough to fledge. The first documented nest for Woodward County was discovered by Hiatt in April 1991 at Fort Supply Lake, but was not successfully used (pers. comm.).

The Eastern Population

A disjunct eastern population of house finches became established in 1940 on Long Island, New York (13), with the release of several caged birds, ostensibly from California. By 1964, these had colonized southeastern New York and southwestern Connecticut and were "apparently starting to spread out" (14). They extended their range by 1971 to northern New England and south through North Carolina (15). These birds continue to surge westward, and will presumably rejoin the western population in the near future, probably somewhere on the Great Plains. By 1983, they had crossed the Mississippi River and nested in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri (16). By the fall of 1988, sightings across the state in the Kansas City area were increasing (17).

An Oklahoma Convergence?

In northeast Oklahoma, house finches were first recorded in Tulsa County in May 1987 (8); by December 1990, more than 135 were noted at one Tulsa locality (18). They were first reported from Muskogee County in November 1988 (17), from Delaware County in the fall of 1989 (19).

Throughout eastern and north central Texas, house finches staged "an unprecedented invasion" during the fall and winter of 1990-1991 (20); the first individuals in two central Oklahoma counties, Payne in January 1990 (21), and Pontotoc in January 1991 (pers. comm., W. A. Carter), may well have been eastern finches.

In view of the geography and chronology of house finch records in Oklahoma and contiguous states since 1919 (Fig. 1), the species is thought to have invaded the state from the west early on. Moreover, this range expansion seems to have accelerated within about the past three decades. During the past five years, house finches have been recorded for the first time in several eastern Oklahoma counties, presumably from the eastern population. It is quite possible that both populations have already merged in central Oklahoma. The situation deserves close surveillance.

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