

DISCOVERY OF THE VERDIN IN SOUTHWESTERN
OKLAHOMA

BY KENNETH D. SEYFFERT

In the early afternoon on 3 May 1971, about half a mile west of Eldorado, Jackson County, southwestern Oklahoma, in the narrow strip of woodland lining Lebos (or Sandy) Creek, I found a Verdin (*Auriparus flaviceps*). Sightings of this species by John S. Weske in northern Texas (see Seyffert, 1971, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 4: 3) had led me to search for suitable Verdin habitat in adjacent parts of Oklahoma. Earlier that day I had found a typical Verdin's nest—obviously an old one—about 4½ feet up in a clump of Christmas cholla



FEMALE VERDIN AT NEST

Photographed during first week of June 1940 by Samuel A. Grimes in Cameron County, Texas. Nest was five and one-half feet up and held four eggs. The "more colorful" male was close by, protesting the photographer's "meddling."

(*Opuntia leptocaulis*). While examining this nest, which was made largely of twigs of sage (*Artemisia* sp.), I heard what I thought must be a Verdin calling. The loud, clear notes continued for some time, almost without letup. Finally I located the bird as it moved about in a mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*). It was indeed a Verdin—the first, so far as I know, to have been seen in Oklahoma. The brightness of its yellow head convinced me that it was a male. In the same general area I found a second old-looking Verdin nest about 6 feet up near the end of a long horizontal branch in a netleaf hackberry (*Celtis reticulata*).

About 30 yards southeast of this second old nest, and about 50 yards from the creek, I found a third nest, this one at the end of a long horizontal hackberry branch about 6½ feet over open ground—and only partly built. Concealing myself, I kept watch for about an hour (13:15 to 14:30). A single bright-headed Verdin—almost certainly the very bird I had seen earlier in the day—visited the nest at five- to ten-minute intervals, remaining in the nest for some time (about 30 seconds to fully two minutes) at each visit. It continued to call while away from the nest, but at the nest it was silent. I saw no other Verdin anywhere in the area.

I visited the nest again on 23 May, when there were four eggs, and on 30 May, when there were two eggs and two small young. I did not know, of course, when the last egg had been laid, or when incubation had begun, but it was obvious that the parent birds were more attentive on the latter date than on the former. On 23 May I observed the nest carefully for 86 minutes (12:21 to 13:47), during which period the female was in the nest 46 minutes, the male 12 minutes, a total of 58 minutes or 67% of the time. On 30 May, when I observed the nest for 180 minutes (10:00 to 13:00), the female was in the nest 132 minutes and the male 14 minutes, a total of 146 minutes, or 81% of the time. Both birds approached and left the nest directly and rapidly, so it was necessary to keep close watch. On 30 May, as I prepared to leave the area, I decided that the female must have flown from the nest without my seeing her; but when I poked my finger into the nest, there she was. Refusing to leave, she let me stroke her head and gently probe about; but when I withdrew my finger she darted out, alighted in a tree close by and moved about excitedly, calling softly. Remaining near, she flew from tree to tree, but refused to go to the nest-tree until the male flew to the nest. Just after he had entered, she too went in, whereupon the male left. Reassured by the behavior of her mate, the female remained in the nest.

When I next visited Lebos Creek, on 27 June, the Verdin calls that I heard seemed more subdued and less persistent than they had in May. Before reaching the nest, I came upon two young birds in a mesquite tree. These were instantly recognizable as Verdins from their shape, behavior, and coloration, though their heads were not yellow. Presently the male parent joined them. I

watched him feed the young at frequent intervals. A third juvenal joined the group and also received food from the adult male, but I did not see the adult female. On checking the nest, I found it to be empty. One young bird remained unaccounted for. Possibly it was in a wholly different area, attended by the female parent.

The behavior of the adult male that day surprised me. For a time he made what appeared to be an effort to scatter the three young—i.e., force them to find food without his assistance. This accomplished, he devoted his time to nest-building. During a little more than an hour of observation (11:55 to 13:01), he carried in seven loads of nest-material. Much of what he brought he found on the ground. On two visits he deposited material and left immediately, but on each of five visits he worked diligently for up to fully two minutes fitting together what he had brought. During this time the young birds were not far away. I heard them occasionally. They made no attempt to help with the nest-building.

On 11 July I found the new nest domed over, but far from finished. It was a mere open-work shell of twigs, with some downy material hanging from the hole at the front. I waited close by for an hour and a half. During this period a Verdin visited the nest once, and this bird was young. My notes, written at the time (10:38), read thus:

"Juvenal came to nest tree with rather large batch of downy plant material in its mouth. Flew to nest but did not enter and immediately flew down to branch below it. Seemed to be having difficulty in keeping the material in its mouth for it gave several up-and-down jabbing motions as though it was trying to get a more secure hold of the mass. Flew up to the nest entrance and awkwardly attempted to enter. Didn't succeed so thrust material into hole but when it withdrew its head the material came with it. Previously it seemed as though it were having trouble in keeping it in its mouth but now it seemed it couldn't get rid of it. Made another try and dumped all of the material into nest, successfully this time. Immediately flew to nearby tree where it began feeding, and remained in area for several minutes intermittently calling softly."

The above-reported behavior strongly suggests that the recently-fledged young Verdin learns something about nest-building while its parent brings food and also builds the nest. The parent that I watched on 27 June was a male. The nest it worked at may, admittedly, have been only a male dormitory or "male winter nest" (see Gilman, 1902, *Condor*, 4: 88-89), but the structure was, even when only partly finished, wonderfully complex and strong.

The narrow strip of native vegetation along Lebos Creek consists principally of mature mesquite about 20 feet high, some stands of which are dense, but the leaf canopy is so thin that grass grows luxuriantly under it. The whole strip is heavily grazed. Where there are openings in the mesquite "forest,"

scattered hackberries grow. Very near the creek there are willows (*Salix* spp.), soapberries (*Sapindus drummondii*), and a few cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*), all of them much higher than the mesquite. Not far from the town of Eldorado there is an open area just south of the creek throughout which Christmas cholla and sage are dominant. The Verdins seemed to prefer the more open woodland for both nesting and foraging; I never saw one in the denser growth.

Southwestern Oklahoma has suffered from severe drought during recent years. On my first visit to Eldorado, the aridity of the countryside thereabouts was striking. John Weske, in a letter to me dated 26 May 1971, expressed his belief that the desert condition now prevailing in southwestern Oklahoma and southward through central Texas might have had a good deal to do with the Verdin's spread northward. He went so far as to question whether the Verdin would continue to survive in Oklahoma if the drought stopped. Careful observations just to the north and south of the Red River obviously should continue. Other "new" species than the Verdin may have made their way into Oklahoma.

2709 SOUTH FAIRFIELD STREET, AMARILLO, TEXAS 79103, 24 OCTOBER 1971.

GENERAL NOTES

Nesting of American Avocet in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.—Early in the afternoon on 5 July 1971 (day partly cloudy; air temperature in the 90's at noon) my class in ornithology and I visited the sewage ponds along the northeast edge of Boise City, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma. We found no birds at the ponds themselves, but at a long, narrow, water-filled ditch across the road just north of the ponds we found four adult and four tiny chick American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*). The pair with the brood were much concerned. They flew back and forth over us, crying out noisily, occasionally alighting near one of the chicks, which were about 4 inches high, had blue legs like those of the adults, and were pale brownish gray throughout their upper parts. The chicks were probably at the water's edge when we arrived at the ponds, but when we first saw them they were well apart from each other in a plowed field just north of the ditch. On being pursued, each chick would run a short way, then crouch and "freeze," becoming almost impossible to see against the dry soil.

Breeding has not previously been reported for this species in Oklahoma west of Harper County. Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 207), who listed *Recurvirostra americana* as a "transient and summer resident . . . commoner in central and western Oklahoma than in eastern," reported its breeding regularly on the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma; he further stated that in 1957 several pairs nested in Harper County (just east of the Panhandle) "when playa basins near Rosston held water all season," and that in 1954 the species nested near Clayton, New Mexico, about 40 miles southwest of Boise City, Oklahoma.—Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biology, Cameron College, Lawton, Oklahoma 73501, 2 August 1971.*

Blue Jay destroys cowbird-parasitized nest of Painted Bunting.—On 9 June 1968, while trimming a climbing rosebush in our back yard in Lawton,