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AN IRRUPTION OF CLARK'S NUTCRACKER IN OKLAHOMA

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IN the winter of 1972-73 the Clark's Nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*) moved into Oklahoma in unprecedented numbers. It was first seen on 17 October. At one locality it lingered until 2 May, at another until 11 June. The species had been recorded in the state only once before—on 5 and 6 November 1961, when a single bird was observed and photographed near the headquarters buildings of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Comanche County, southwestern



CLARK'S NUTCRACKER

An individual nicknamed "Smoky" that visited the Eugene Schauer residence at 710 South Adams St. in Stillwater, Oklahoma from 15 December 1972 until the following 2 May. Photographed in late January 1973 by Elton Nixon for the Stillwater News-Press, and reproduced here through the courtesy of that newspaper.

Oklahoma (Davis and Halloran, 1962, *Southwest. Nat.*, 7: 264; Baumgartner, 1962, *Audubon Field Notes*, 16: 51; Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, p. 381).

Several of the fall sightings in 1972 were in the Wichita Mountains refuge or close by. On 17 October, Eugene Bartnicki, the Refuge Biologist, saw one at Rush Lake, on the refuge. On 4 November, John Coykendall, an employee at the refuge, saw two at Lake Elmer Thomas, also on the refuge. On 7 November, Bartnicki saw two at Lake Elmer Thomas and photographed one of them (print, which shows the barely identifiable bird, on file at Cameron College). On 26 November, John Howard, a student at Cameron College, collected a specimen (female, JDT 204) in open oak timber about 2 miles northwest of the village of Medicine Park, outside the refuge but not far northeast of the base of Mt. Scott. In the stomach were part of an acorn, three grubs (each about $\frac{1}{4}$ in. long), and remains of several other insects (J. D. Tyler). On 2 and 3 December, Carroll Ridgway and his wife Velma observed a nutcracker in their yard in Fletcher, Comanche County; on 2 December it spent an hour and a half digging in the ground under an elm, perhaps caching food there; on 3 December a Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) drove it from the yard. On 19 December, John Coykendall saw two nutcrackers on the Wichita Mountains refuge, one at the Mt. Scott campground, the other on Timber Hill between Lake Burford and the Lake Osage turnoff, in an area about 6 miles west of Mt. Scott.

Meanwhile, the species had appeared in other parts of the state, no more than two birds on any occasion. From 27 October to 7 November members of the Palmer Terrell and Joseph Carrier families observed a single bird at a cattle feedlot along the northeast edge of Stillwater, Payne County, north-central Oklahoma. On 1 November, Steven W. Platt and Harrison Payne, students at Oklahoma State University, observed and photographed a single bird as it fed on juniper berries near Lake McMurtry in southeastern Noble County about 6 miles west and $5\frac{1}{2}$ miles north of Stillwater. On 6 November, Laurence E. Dunn collected a specimen (female, UOMZ 7397), one of two birds that visited his farmyard about 5 miles northwest of Rosston, Harper County, in the northwestern corner of the main body of the state. The second bird lingered a day or so about the buildings. On 12 November, William H. Campbell saw and photographed a bird that visited his yard in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma. Several Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*) and Mockingbirds followed the unfamiliar visitor about, almost "mobbing" it at times. During severe weather in early December (exact date not recorded) a single bird came to the Laurance Regnier ranch house 4 miles south of Kenton, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma, apparently on the lookout for food. After refusing certain items, it was given some ground beef, which it ate eagerly. Next day two nutcrackers came to the yard and received food. The two birds lingered near the ranch buildings for several days but did not spend the winter there.

The several nutcrackers thus far discussed did not continue to visit any given spot for more than a few days, so far as anyone knows. On 6 December, however, in Pryor, Mayes County, northeastern Oklahoma, Wanda Clark saw at her feeder a bird that continued to visit the neighborhood until 10 January. On 15 December, in the yard of Eugene Schauer and his wife Thelma in Stillwater, a bird appeared that continued to return "off and on" until the following 2 May. It was attracted at first by the nuts in two paper-shell pecan trees, then by pecans placed out for it, some of which it cached in the yard. Nicknamed "Smoky," it was known to many persons of the area and was carefully observed and several times photographed, though no one discovered where it roosted. If the supply of pecans at the feeding-counter ran out, it called for more. Two birds that appeared on 23 December in the yard of Clyde Longbotham and his wife Rita in Guymon, Texas County, in the Panhandle, also continued to visit the yard week after week. Often they were observed pounding at food wedged into a narrow fork in a branch. They were last seen on 11 June. On 27 December, a single bird visited the yard of Lester Young and his wife Goldie in Cherokee, Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma. It was feeding on suet tacked to a tree. It remained in the neighborhood until 17 April, where it was observed chiefly by the Youngs. On 13 February, David Jobes saw it—or, conceivably, a second nutcracker—in another part of town.

A single bird seen on 4 January, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, by Wade C. Walker, probably did not remain in the vicinity, for no one else reported it. When first sighted, it was flying over a paved street, carrying a piece of bread in its beak. It alighted near the curbing, ate the bread, walked into a hedgerow close by, and disappeared.

Two birds observed for some time on 18 January by Frances Fields in her yard in Midwest City, central Oklahoma, walked about looking for food. They seemed to pay special attention to grass at the base of a tree, as if they had cached food there.

A single bird, seen by Fred E. Tarman on 4, 5, 6, and 10 April, in Norman, carried pecans from a tree (or from the ground under the tree) to a feeder where it held each nut in one foot while pounding the tough shell open.

The Oklahoma irruption discussed above was, of course, only part of the vast Great Plains irruption of the winter of 1972-73. Why the irruption? Davis and Williams (1957, *Condor*, 59: 297-307), who reported on five irruptions in California (1898, 1919, 1935, 1950, 1955), have this to say in their summary: "Nutcrackers depend on pine cones for winter food. Californian irruptions appear to occur when an unusually large population of nutcrackers is faced with a low supply of food on the normal winter range. The irruptions correlate with

severe and widespread failure of cone crops following two or more years of large crops, during which the nutcracker population in general, and the breeding population in particular, apparently increases significantly as a result of abundance of winter food." The same authors, reporting on a 1961 irruption in California (1964, *Wilson Bull.*, 76: 10-17), make the following statement: "It is concluded that food is the proximate factor underlying irruptions of the Clark's Nutcracker and that these irruptions are not invasion migrations triggered by the same proximate factors which trigger ordinary migrations."

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GENERAL NOTES

Apparent predation by Golden Eagle at Great Blue Heron colony.—On the afternoon of 16 March 1973, while taking photographs at a colony of Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*) at the east of Lake Eucha (Upper Spavinaw Lake) in Delaware County, northeastern Oklahoma, I watched a Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) as it alighted on one of the heron nests and appeared to eat the nest's contents.

The 52 nests of the colony were all in one huge 100-foot sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*). Upon my arrival, all of the herons flew to a bluff about a quarter of a mile away, where they perched while I set up my camera equipment and partly hid myself. After about ten minutes, the herons began to return. Presently all were back, some of them busy with nest-building, others squatting on what probably were eggs. The date was almost certainly too early for chicks. According to Force and Koons (1930, *Wilson Bull.*, 42: 119), Mrs. A. E. Gilmore collected a set of four eggs on 15 March 1923 in Tulsa County, but no data at hand make clear that eggs ever hatch that early in Oklahoma.

After I had been at my post for about 30 seconds, a sudden hush fell over the entire colony. All of the herons, obviously alarmed, stood up on their nests, remaining motionless for about 30 seconds, then off they flew in various directions as a large raptorial bird appeared, made straight for and alighted on the highest nest in the tree.

Through the 4x telephoto lens on my camera I positively identified the bird as a Golden Eagle. The golden sheen of its hind neck was clearly visible; its tail feathers were crossed by light-colored bands; and its legs were completely feathered down to the toes. Seemingly unalarmed by my presence, it immediately began to eat. From my position on the ground I could not tell what it was eating, for it was facing away from me with its head down.

It is barely possible that the eagle had flown in with prey, though I saw nothing in its feet as it approached the nest. At any rate, it raised its head after eating, scanned the area, and took wing. After circling several times it flew eastward until out of sight. Soon after its departure the herons returned to their nests and resumed normal activities.— James W. Lish, *Oklahoma Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, 404 Life Sciences Bldg., Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma 74074, 6 April 1973.*