

THE PLAIN TITMOUSE IN OKLAHOMA

BY DAVID A. WIGGINS

The Plain Titmouse (*Parus inornatus*), a species easily recognizable at all seasons by its crest and slate-gray plumage, breeds in widely scattered pairs in pinyon-juniper woodland in the Black Mesa country at the northwestern corner of Oklahoma's Panhandle. The only sympatric bird with which it might be confused is the Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*), a much smaller species with proportionately longer tail and no crest. Between the habitat of the Plain Titmouse, a western bird, and that of the Tufted Titmouse (*Parus bicolor*), an eastern bird, lies a vast stretch of comparatively treeless terrain, much of it under cultivation today.



PLAIN TITMOUSE

Photographed along Texakeet Creek about 4 miles south of Kenton, Oklahoma on 18 April 1976 by David A. Wiggins.

Parus inornatus was first recorded in Oklahoma on 6 January 1920, when R. Crompton Tate saw a single bird in or near Kenton, Cimarron County (Tate, 1923, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 3: 50; Nice and Nice, 1924, The birds of Oklahoma, Univ. Studies No. 286, Univ. of Oklahoma, Norman, p. 97; Nice, 1931, The birds of Oklahoma, Revised Ed., Univ. of Oklahoma Press, p. 132). Sightings by Tate in the same area of six birds on 22 December 1922 and of three birds on 1 January 1923 were reported by Nice and Nice (*loc. cit.*) and by Nice (*loc. cit.*). The species' occurrence on the C. F. Rowan ranch near Kenton and its eating of "weed seeds" at a "feeding shelf" in Kenton were reported by Tate (1924, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 4: 35; Nice, *op. cit.*, p. 133). A further sighting by Tate of a single bird on 30 January 1930 and the taking of a specimen, presumably on one of the dates mentioned above, were reported by Nice (*op. cit.*, p. 132).

In the fall of 1932 and 1933, John B. Semple and George M. Sutton, who collected four specimens near Kenton, saw the species so many times "before any general influx of other winter visitant species had taken place" that they fell to believing that it bred in the region, even though they did not see "family flocks going about together" (Sutton, 1934, Ann. Carnegie Mus., 24: 33). Proof of breeding was obtained on 5 June 1936, when Sutton observed a pair carrying food to well-developed young in a nest "in an old woodpecker hole in a large 'mountain' pine" (Sutton, 1936, Auk, 53: 433) about four miles south of Kenton, and on 22 May 1937, when Sutton collected "a breeding male" seven miles southeast of Kenton (Sutton, 1938, Auk, 55: 505).

According to the summary of records filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, no Oklahoma sighting of the species was reported between the years 1938 and 1952. Most sightings since 1952 have been in fall and winter, though a few have been in April. Sightings since 1920 have been of singles, twosomes, and loose companies of up to four or five birds, probably family parties. The greatest number reported for one day is sixteen birds: on 28 December 1970, sixteen birds were seen by W. M. Davis *et al.* (1971, Amer. Birds, 25: 413). Whether a bond holds pairs together all year or not, family groups break up in spring, at which season single birds probably represent breeding pairs, since females are likely to be on the nest during much of the incubation period (Price, 1936, Condor, 38: 24; Dixon, 1949, Condor, 51: 126).

According to Dixon (*op. cit.*, p. 112), the density of Plain Titmouse populations in coastal California appears to be limited by the number of "cavities for nest sites" available. The breeding woodpeckers of Oklahoma's Black Mesa country include regularly the Common Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), Ladder-back (*Picoides scalaris*), Downy (*P. pubescens*), Hairy (*P. villosus*), and Red-headed (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*); irregularly the Lewis's (*M. lewis*); and rarely the Red-bellied (*M. carolinus*). Not one of these is restricted to the pinyon-juniper woodland, and the Ladder-back, perhaps the commonest of the seven, though often seen in the pinyon-juniper, digs its holes in other sorts of trees (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma Birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 318).

Whether availability of nest-holes is a determining factor or not, a second nest of *Parus inornatus* for Oklahoma was discovered on 18 April 1976 by Gary D. Schnell *et al.* along Texakeet Creek four miles south of Kenton. The nest hole, probably that of a Ladder-backed or Downy woodpecker, was about five feet from the ground in a partly dead elm about fifteen feet southwest of the Laurance Regnier ranch house. Certain members of Schnell's party saw one bird go to the nest after both birds of the pair had scolded. I photographed the bird that did not go to the nest.

Except in coastal California, where it lives chiefly among oaks (Small, 1974, *The birds of California*, Macmillan, New York, p. 106), the Plain Titmouse inhabits pinyon-juniper woodland. In more or less montane eastern California it is a bird of the pinyon-juniper (Small, *loc. cit.*). In Arizona it is common in the northern and central parts of the state, an area throughout which there is much pinyon-juniper, but rare in the southeast, where there is little or no pinyon-juniper (Phillips, Marshall and Monson, 1964, *The birds of Arizona*, Univ. of Arizona Press, Tucson, p. 111). In New Mexico it is common in the "oak and pinyon-juniper foothills" at "from 5000 to 7000 feet" (Ligon, 1961, *New Mexico birds and where to find them*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, pp. 208-209). In Colorado it is common "in the juniper-pinyon country of southern and western parts of the state" (Bailey and Niedrach, 1965, *Birds of Colorado*, Denver Mus. Nat. Hist., p. 577).

In Oklahoma, *Parus inornatus* is almost exclusively a bird of pinyon-juniper woodland. It has never been seen among the cottonwoods, willows, and salt cedar of the Cimarron River's flood-plain. Unlike the Scrub Jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*), Pinyon Jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*), and Bushtit, all of which are residents of the pinyon-juniper, it has not been observed to move eastward some winters or to descend to the lowlands during that season. Whether, like the Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) and Mountain Chickadee (*Parus gambeli*), it moves into the Black Mesa country from Colorado and New Mexico now and then is not known. The fact that the species is seen in greater numbers in fall and winter than at other seasons may well be a result of successful rearing of broods during the preceding summer.

2713 HOLLYWOOD AVENUE, NORMAN, OKLAHOMA 73069, 11 NOVEMBER 1977.

WORK TO BE DONE IN THE BLACK MESA COUNTRY

BY GEORGE M. SUTTON

Several bird species found breeding in the Black Mesa country of far northwestern Oklahoma by R. Crompton Tate between 1908 and 1931 (see Nice, 1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, p. 43) have not been found there in summer since 1931 so far as I know, this despite the fact that much fieldwork has been done in the area. The species in this category include the Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Pedioecetes phasianellus*), Sage Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), Common