

BREEDING OF THE RUFOUS-SIDED TOWHEE IN OKLAHOMA

by FREDERICK M. BAUMGARTNER

On or about 15 June 1977, Richard Sanders discovered the nest of a Rufous-sided Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) on a slope about half a mile south of Spavinaw Creek and 4 miles north of Colcord, in Delaware County, north-eastern Oklahoma. The nest was on the ground under a scrubby oak in open oak-hickory woodland throughout which were brushpiles, blown-over dead trees, and a variety of forbs and grasses. In the nest were three large young, one of which scrambled off as Sanders approached. On 22 June, research students D. C. Rudolph (Texas Tech. University, Lubbock, Texas) and Christina Swartz (Little Lewis Whirlwind Nature School, Jay, Oklahoma) saw an adult male and female Rufous-sided Towhee near the nest site, thus confirming



NEST OF RUFOUS-SIDED TOWHEE

Photographed on 11 May 1978 by Marguerite Baumgartner in open pine-oak woodland near Colcord, Delaware County, northeastern Oklahoma.

Sanders's provisional identification, though they did not see any of the young birds that day. On 25 June the nest was collected. It has been presented to the University of Oklahoma Bird Range.

On 10 May 1978, Mary Louise Guess, of Bethany, Oklahoma, found a Rufous-sided Towhee nest on the Guess property about three quarters of a mile east of the spot at which the 1977 nest had been. On 11 May, my wife Marguerite and I visited this nest. With us were the Looneys (Murray Looney and his wife Mary), whose property abuts the Guess acreage. The nest was on a west-facing slope above a narrow rocky ravine in an open stand of small short-leaf pines, large post oaks, large black oaks, and fire-scarred snags with an understory of oak saplings, sassafras, flowering dogwood, and azalea. Various grasses and forbs formed a fairly dense ground cover.

The female towhee flushed from the nest when we were about 25 feet away, alighted briefly about 12 feet from the nest, and disappeared. The nest was sunk in the ground under a small shrubby deerberry (*Vaccinium stamineum*) and framed by a thick mat of dead leaves. It contained four eggs that appeared to have been lightly incubated. Nest and site were photographed that day by my wife and a slide of each was presented to the University of Oklahoma Bird Range.

On 6 June, Murray Looney revisited the nest, finding it empty. He neither saw nor heard a towhee in the area. When the nest was collected on 6 August it appeared fresh and unused, containing none of the powdery duff that usually accumulates as the sheathing of the young birds' growing feathers dries and flakes off.

The two above-reported nests may well be the first of the Rufous-sided Towhee to have been discovered in Oklahoma. The "3 full grown young" seen on 9 June 1917 (no nest mentioned) by A. J. B. Kirn at Copan, in Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma (Nice, 1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, p. 179), presumably were fully feathered and out of the nest. The "set of 4 eggs" said to have been collected at Tulsa on 12 May 1922 by G. W. Morse (Nice, *loc. cit.*) may or may not have been of *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*, for many of Morse's identifications are questionable.

There have been a few additional sightings of the species in Oklahoma within the breeding season. All of these, with the one exception noted below, were in northeastern Oklahoma:

In 1921 L. B. Nice saw "several" Rufous-sided Towhees in Ottawa County on 12 June and in Delaware County on 15 June (Nice and Nice, 1924, *Birds of Oklahoma*, Univ. Oklahoma Bull., New Series No. 20, Univ. Studies No. 288, p. 76). Dr. Nice's itinerary was, according to a later publication (Nice, *op. cit.*, p. 45): "Miami, June 12; Salina, Spavinaw and Locust Grove, Mayes County, June 13-14; Jay and Grove, Delaware county, June 15-16."

For almost fifty years the species was not reported from anywhere in the state within its breeding season. Oklahoma's Breeding Bird Surveys (U.S. Dept. Interior, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Migratory Non-game

Bird Studies) have, however, brought to light the following four recent Rufous-sided Towhee sightings: one bird in Ottawa County on Route 22 near Peoria on 1 June 1968 (Dotty M. Goard); one on Route 23 in Craig County east of Welch on 30 May 1968 (Gene T. Hendricks); and two widely separated birds, each "spotted" and "with red eyes," on Route 19 in Dewey County west of Eagle City, in the northwestern part of the main body of the state, on 19 June 1971 (Robert T. Lynn). Though well within the breeding season, some or all of these sightings may represent exceptionally late migration.

In the three years during which my wife and I have lived in Delaware County (since August of 1975) we have observed very few towhees at any season. Summer and late spring sightings have indicated that the population occupying the brushy slopes above Spavinaw Creek north of Colcord is small and local. We visited the site of the 1977 nest on 29 April 1978 and neither saw nor heard a towhee on that date. Between 1 May and 18 June 1978, however, Mary Looney heard at least one towhee singing on at least four dates near her house, which is about half a mile northeast of the 1977 nest site and a quarter mile northwest of the 1978 nest site. On 10 June 1978, at about 0930, Mary Looney and I found a male and female towhee together in a shallow ravine in the same area. The female scolded vigorously before both birds flew off together.

Every bird that we have seen in northeastern Oklahoma in summer has been plain-backed rather than spotted-backed.

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A BROWN PELICAN IN CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

By BRAD CARLTON

At about 4 o'clock in the afternoon on 23 April 1976 (air temperature up to 62°F. by noon; southwest wind 10-15 mph), I was surprised to find no shorebirds at Prairie Dog Point on the west side of Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma. What I did find was six Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) standing at the water's edge with a large, dark, short-legged bird whose back was toward me and whose bill was tucked into its scapular plumage. As I approached the seven birds, the gulls flew off and the large bird lifted its head, revealing a massive bill and a pronounced pattern of dark-brown and white on the neck. Obviously it could be nothing but a Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), the first I had ever seen away from the ocean coast.

Immediately I drove home for my wife, Helen, for I wanted her to see the bird. At about 4:45 she, Henry Walter, and I returned to Prairie Dog Point, found the bird without trouble, and watched it for about 20 minutes. It would "spook" when approached to within about 100 feet, but after flying about for a while would return to the Point and settle down.

At 7 o'clock the following morning (air temperature 52°F.; north wind 20-30 mph), Wesley Isaacs and I failed to find the pelican at Prairie Dog Point, but we found it on the big impoundment's opposite side, at the tip of Gun Club