

BREEDING OF RUDDY DUCK IN OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN S. SHACKFORD

As a transient and winter resident, the Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) is well known and widely distributed in Oklahoma; it has been seen, too, in summer (27 May to 17 August) at scattered localities, the southernmost of which are in Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma (Sutton, 1974, Check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 8). In the opinion of L. E. Dunn, of Gate, Oklahoma, it has nested from time to time at the east end of the Panhandle "when playa areas there hold water all summer" (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma



A RUDDY DUCK AND HER BROOD

Photographed by John S. Shackford at a sewage pond near Boise City, Oklahoma, on 30 June 1979. Note that the pattern on the chicks' heads is much like that of the mother bird.

Press, Norman, p. 83), but thus far there has been no documented breeding record for the state.

On 6 June 1978, in a stand of cattails about 150 feet long and 50 feet wide growing in one of several sewage ponds a mile northeast of Boise City, Cimarron County (at the west end of the Panhandle), I found a nest and five eggs that proved to be those of a Ruddy Duck. The nest, made of cattail leaves, most of them green, was a bit over a foot wide at its widest and a few inches above water a little less than 3 feet deep. The eggs were warm, as if from incubation, though no duck of any species was in evidence close by. To my surprise, I found not a trace of down in the nest. The eggs were white and coarse-shelled. Not knowing what species these belonged to, I placed one of them on a piece of paper and recorded its size and shape by running a pencil, vertically held, around it. Using this sketch, with allowance for the thickness of the pencil, I would know about what the eggs were like when I consulted reference works.

Later that day, in the same stand of cattails, I found two nests of the Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), each with eggs. The Mallard eggs seemed to be just about the same size as the white eggs in the moot nest. What Mallard-sized duck laid *white* eggs? The question bothered me.

The following day (7 June), I approached the moot nest carefully. Though unable to see it (because of the cattails) when only a few feet away, I heard a noise that I took to be that of the female as she slipped from the eggs into the water. The four eggs (one fewer than on 6 June) were very warm. Several seconds later, and 30-40 yards off, a female Ruddy Duck surfaced briefly, head down, body low, moving directly away from the nest. Even as I noted details that made identification certain, she went under again. Thus, in a series of dives, she slunk off, eventually reaching the far side of the pond, where she remained on the surface continuously, giving me an excellent look at the color pattern of her head. I noted an interesting fact about her as she idled there, not very clearly visible because of the dark reflections of the grass and weeds: her tail seemed to be on, if not under, the water.

A year later, on 28 June 1979, J. Brooks Parkhill and his wife Thula saw what they suspected was a female Ruddy Duck with six third-grown chicks on one of the same Boise City sewage ponds. That evening, the Parkhills, Henry Walter, and I saw the mother and brood, confirming the Parkhills' provisional identification. On 29 and 30 June, I took photographs in which the color pattern on the chicks' heads does not show very clearly, though that on the mother's head does. John G. Newell was with the Parkhills, Henry Walter, and me when we visited the mother and brood on 30 June.

All of us noted with interest how the chicks swam tightly bunched close to their mother. At a distance, viewed without the help of a binocular, the group appeared to be a single bird, moving low on the surface. The species is essentially aquatic. According to Alexander Wetmore (in Bent, 1925, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 130: 155), young Ruddies "as well as adults are more or less helpless on land, resembling grebes in this respect. Young birds half grown were able to

waddle a few steps, but fell on the breast almost at once and then usually progressed by shoving along in a prostrate position with both feet stroking together." The huddling of mother-and-brood that we observed, the largeness of eggs, and the consequent largeness of chicks at hatching all probably have survival value through reducing losses to such aquatic predators as turtles, fish, and snakes.

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GENERAL NOTES

American Kestrel nest in Comanche County, Oklahoma.—The American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) is believed to breed throughout Oklahoma (Sutton, 1974, Check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 11), but so little has been reported about observed nestings that all available information on the subject deserves publication.

In the summer of 1966, a pair of kestrels nested in Elmer Thomas Park in Lawton, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. The nest was in the attic of an old one-story railway station, a frame building that was moved some years ago from Elgin, Oklahoma to the grounds of the Museum of the Great Plains in Lawton. Just where in the attic the nest was I did not ascertain, but I saw the parent birds coming and going through a small hole in the gable of the building's north side.

On 16 May I saw one of the old birds enter the nest-hole. Two days later (18 May), I found a dead downy chick about 4 inches long on the ground directly below the nest-hole. On 30 May, I caught a short-tailed young female

AMERICAN KESTREL

A not quite fully fledged young female bird on its back with talons ready for action. Photographed on 30 May 1966 in Lawton, Oklahoma, by Louis E. McGee. Even in the plumage worn during their first winter, young females are distinguishable from young males by the many bars on the tail.