

THE OLDSQUAW IN OKLAHOMA

BY JACK D. TYLER

The Oldsquaw (*Clangula hyemalis*) is a sea duck that breeds along arctic coasts of both eastern and western hemispheres. In North America it ranges south in winter to Washington state on the Pacific coast and to North Carolina on the Atlantic; rarely does it reach the Gulf Coast. Inland, it winters regularly in large flocks on the Great Lakes and irregularly on large bodies of water south and west to Texas and Colorado (AOU Check-list, 1957, p. 87; Bent, 1925, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 130, Pt. 2, p. 49). Fall migration begins between August and October when large flocks congregate in Hudson Strait. The earliest migrants reach New England in late October, but the majority not until late fall or early winter (Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 47).

Nice (1931, *The birds of Oklahoma*, Rev. ed., Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv. 3, No. 1) did not list the Oldsquaw for Oklahoma. Sutton, who called it a "transient and winter visitant recorded from November 5 to April 8" (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 80), subsequently widened the span of dates to "October 29 to April 8, exceptionally to April 12, 15" (Sutton, 1974, *A check-list of Oklahoma birds*, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, p. 8). Sutton's Summary of Records indicates that the



OLDSQUAW

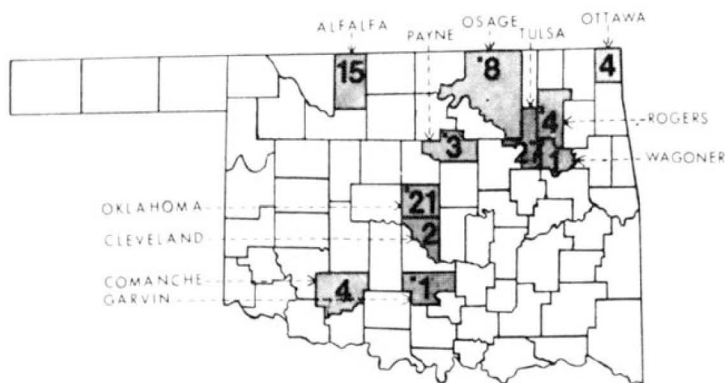
A short-tailed drake, probably an immature bird molting into its first winter plumage, photographed by Jerry Sisler at Lake Yahola, Mohawk Park, Tulsa, Oklahoma on 25 January 1980.

species was first recorded in the state on 26 December 1936, when H. S. Davis, Barbara Tenney, and J. Schwabe observed a hen in Mohawk Park, Tulsa, Tulsa County (1937, Bird-Lore 39: 64). Between that date and 26 December 1980, at least 90 Oldsquaws have been recorded by way of 42 observations in 11 Oklahoma counties. The species has been seen in each of the following periods: 1936, 1939, 1940, 1943, 1945, 1949-51, 1953-55, 1960-62, 1964, 1967-78, 1980. Most sightings have been of one or two (up to five) birds. Two-somes believed to be pairs were reported only twice (5 November, 24 December).

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

1936-45: During this period there were five sightings of the Oldsquaw in Oklahoma, each of a single bird. Two of the five were believed to be females, and one a short-tailed drake. The sightings were in Tulsa (three), Payne, and Oklahoma counties, one in "fall," the rest between late December and 17 January.

1949-55: On 5 November 1949, two Oldsquaws, believed to be a paired drake and hen, were observed in Comanche County. Between that date and 8 April 1950, a total of seven more were seen, one each in Wagoner, Tulsa, Payne, and Oklahoma counties, three in Alfalfa County. Three birds arrived from the north in November, the rest between 11 December and 26 February. The February bird, seen repeatedly in Tulsa's Mohawk Park, lingered until 8 April 1950 (1950, Audubon Field Notes 4: 208, 249). A hen at Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City was seen by many observers between 30 January and 4 April 1954 (1954, Audubon Field Notes 8: 260). A hen (OAMC 455) was collected at



OKLAHOMA OLDSQUAW SIGHTINGS

Most Oldsquaws sighted in Oklahoma have been on large impoundments. The only river sightings have been along the Salt Fork of the Arkansas just below the Salt Plains Reservoir dam. Very few drakes in full winter plumage have been seen, but four were long-tailed.

Lake Carl Blackwell in Payne County on 16 November 1955 (1956, Audubon Field Notes 10: 35).

1960-69: Fifty-four Oldsquaws were observed (16 sightings in six counties) between 29 October and 28 March during this decade. In Tulsa County, 21 birds were counted during three sightings, one flock of 16 being observed by several persons on Lake Yahola in Mohawk Park on 12 January 1961 (1961, Audubon Field Notes 15: 341). On 1 December 1960, a flock of 12 "hens or henlike birds" was observed in the middle of Lake Overholser in Oklahoma City (1961, Audubon Field Notes 15: 54). Two more sightings were in Oklahoma County, four were at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, four were at Hulah Reservoir in Osage County, one was in Payne County, and one (of four birds) was on Grand Lake in Ottawa County, the last on 28 March 1964 (1964, Audubon Field Notes 18: 367). Thirty-three birds were reported simply as Oldsquaws, 17 were called females or female-like, and four were thought to be males, though only one of these had long middle tail feathers. Two birds that appeared to be a pair were noted at Tulsa on 24 December 1960 (1961, Audubon Field Notes 15: 341). Four early observations were made between 29 October and 30 November, while 11 were between 1 December and 23 February. Three to five birds were seen repeatedly on the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River just below the Salt Plains Reservoir dam from 2 January to 27 March 1968. No specimen is known to have been taken within the decade.

1970-80: The 22 birds seen in eight counties during this span of years included nine drakes, three of them with long middle rectrices. Three sightings were in Oklahoma County, two each in Alfalfa, Comanche, Osage, and Tulsa counties, and one each in Cleveland, Garvin and Rogers counties. Five specimens were collected: mounted female (UOMZ 7308) at Hulah Reservoir, Osage County, on 31 December 1970; female (UOMZ 7392) at Wiley Post Lake, 2 miles north of Maysville, Garvin County, on 10 December 1972 (1973, Amer. Birds 27: 634); mounted short-tailed drake in changing feather (UOMZ 7519) at Hulah Reservoir on 15 December 1973; and two short-tailed drakes in changing feather (UOMZ 7520, 7521) at Lake Hefner, Oklahoma County, on 9 March 1974.

PLUMAGE

Of the 90 birds sighted, 48 were called simply Oldsquaws, without any guessing as to sex, 27 were thought to be females or female-like, 12 were short-tailed males thought to be in their first year, and four (only) were males with long middle tail feathers.

Whether or not *Clangula hyemalis* is indeed "one of the few ducks in the world to assume a distinctly nuptial plumage" (Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 41); whether or not it is without a "real eclipse plumage" (Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 42); and whether or not it has "no regular eclipse molt, as have most other ducks" (Kortright, 1942, The ducks, geese and swans of North America, Amer. Wildlife Inst., Washington D.C., p. 285), the drake of the species is notable for wearing, when fully

adult, a boldly patterned winter plumage that some authors call a courtship plumage, and a more somber, less boldly patterned plumage in summer. Attempting to place short-tailed winter birds as to sex and age, especially when they are molting, is well nigh impossible in the field and guessing may not yield meaningful results. The fact that only four long-tailed drakes have been seen and only three short-tailed drakes collected supports belief that most Oldsquaws that visit Oklahoma are females. Many fully adult drakes that winter on the Great Lakes wear a high plumage most of the season. Females, both old and young, and some drakes apparently avoid the rigors of winter by moving to more southern latitudes.

DISCUSSION

Oklahoma sightings of the Oldsquaw between 1936 and 1980 span the period between 29 October (Osage County) and 15 April (Comanche County). Only two of the 42 records clearly indicate overwintering: (1) a single bird seen repeatedly at Public Service Lake near Lawton from 11 December 1973 to 15 April 1974; and (2) one to five birds seen repeatedly on the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River just below the Salt Plains Reservoir dam from 2 January to 27 March 1968. Arrival here from the north occurs principally in late fall and early winter (29 October to 20 December) but southward migration appears to peak between latter December and 18 January. Return to the breeding ground probably proceeds in leisurely fashion, for the tundra ponds and far northern ocean may be frozen shut until the end of May and the species depends on open water for its food supply.

Almost half of the 90 Oldsquaws reported (44 in 18 observations) were seen in the northeastern part of the state. In central Oklahoma (including Payne County) 13 reports totalled 27 birds, and in the western part of the state 11 sightings yielded 19. Birders in Tulsa County reported 27 Oldsquaws, in Oklahoma County 21, in Alfalfa County 15, in Osage County eight. The largest centers of human population, the most active bird clubs, and some of the state's largest lakes are in these counties. The 15 birds reported from Alfalfa County were all observed at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge, a mecca for migratory waterfowl and also for bird students.

Most Oldsquaws in Oklahoma have been seen on large lakes constructed by man within the past 50 years. A few adventuresome birds at first, then others, probably began to winter farther and farther south, taking advantage of the habitat and food provided by these new bodies of water. Consequently, Oklahoma and other states in the Southern Great Plains now lie on the southern edge of the Oldsquaw's wintering range.

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GENERAL NOTES

Breeding of Hooded Merganser in Alfalfa County, Oklahoma.—On 21 May 1981 I spent the morning checking the water-level of ponds on the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma.