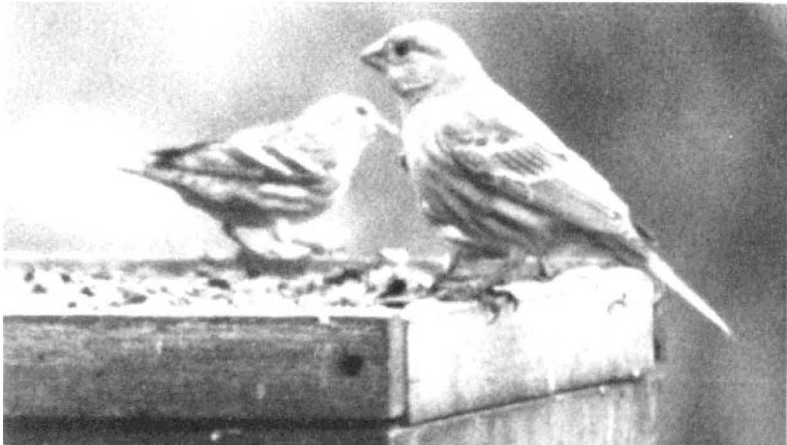


EASTWARD EXPANSION OF
THE HOUSE FINCH'S RANGE IN OKLAHOMA

BY MITCHELL OLIPHANT AND INA S. BROWN

The House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*), or linnet, has long been known as one of the most common birds of the western United States. Its range extends from British Columbia south through California to southern Mexico, thence east to the Great Plains. In 1940, a small number of birds was released into the wild on Long Island, New York. They had been captured in California and shipped to New York City, where they were to be sold as "Hollywood finches" (Bent, A. C., *et al.*, 1968, Life histories of North American birds, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. No. 237, Pt. 1, pp. 290-291). From this small beginning, they multiplied prodigiously. Today they occupy a vast area of the eastern United States, and are still rapidly expanding their range to the west, having already crossed the Mississippi River. In 1983, they nested at Jennings, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis, and were reported from Davenport, Iowa (Peterjohn, B. G., 1983, *Am. Birds* 37:995). It now seems probable that before long the western and eastern populations of the species will meet.



MALE HOUSE FINCH WITH PINE SISKIN

Note the bigger bill, relatively larger size, and boldly streaked flanks of House Finch on right. Photo taken in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, by Mitchell Oliphant sometime between 20 February and 20 March 1984.

While the House Finch has been spreading through the East in a manner reminiscent of the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) in the nineteenth century, it has also been expanding its range in the West, though here at a slower pace (Williams, F., 1981, *Am. Birds* 35:956). To illustrate this point, it is useful to examine in detail the history of the species in Oklahoma.

The first record for the House Finch in Oklahoma apparently dates back to the summer of 1919, when fewer than a dozen (mostly males) were observed by E. P. Rothrock in a cottonwood grove 5 miles north of Kenton, Cimarron County, far northwestern Oklahoma (Tate, R. C., 1925, *Condor* 27:176). The species became increasingly more common until, by 1922, Tate had discovered several nests in and near the town of Kenton itself. In the spring of 1925, he described the southeastern limits of the range as being about 9 miles southeast of Kenton (Tate, 1925, *loc. cit.*). During subsequent years, there were records from Cimarron County in 1926 (Ortenburger, A. I., and E. L. Little, Jr., 1930, *Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv.* 2:193) and in 1932, 1933, 1936, and 1937 (G. M. Sutton Summary of Bird Records, *Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist.*, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman). No other reports were published until 1952, but since then the species has been recorded virtually every year (Sutton Summary, *op. cit.*), leading Sutton (1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 590) to list the House Finch as "resident" in Cimarron County. Interestingly, the species often nests in walkingstick cholla cactus (*Opuntia imbricata*), which is common in the Black Mesa country. By 1957, House Finches were repeatedly being seen eastward to Boise City and in woods along the Cimarron River 13 miles north of that town, although no nests were found in these locations (Sutton, 1967, *loc. cit.*). On 3 February 1957, the first sighting of a House Finch in Oklahoma outside of Cimarron County was recorded. On that date, Sutton and others saw two (adult male, UOMZ 2908 collected) in Red Rock Canyon State Park, Caddo County, west-central Oklahoma (Sutton, 1967, *loc. cit.*).

In west-central Oklahoma, there has been a significant series of House Finch sightings in the vicinity of Elk City, Beckham County, since 1964. Records kept by Ina S. Brown reveal that from 15 January to 6 May of that year, she and her husband, Ivy R. Brown, repeatedly observed a small flock at a feeder in the yard of Nell Harris. Since then, the finches have returned to Elk City every winter, having been recorded at various locations in the city by Mrs. Brown and, during the period 1968-73, also by Eva Cheesman. On only one occasion — in the late winter of 1969 — did Mrs. Brown observe the species in the countryside near Elk City; in this part of the state, it seems to prefer living in towns. By 1980, the birds appeared to have become year-round residents of Elk City. In May of that year, Mrs. Brown frequently observed adult birds bringing young to a feeder in her yard. During the spring of 1981, while both male and female-like birds again visited her feeder, several fruitless searches for a nest were made by Mrs. Brown and others. In 1982, there were, as usual, numerous sightings in Elk City, but again no nest was found. However, Mrs. Brown was informed by Mrs. Henry Lowrance of a nest that fledged young in Erick, some 35 miles to the southwest. Finally, in April of 1983, a nest was discovered in Elk City at the Orval Phillips residence. It had been

built in half a coconut shell decorated with artificial flowers and hung beneath the eaves of the house. Five eggs were in the nest on 22 April and all five had hatched three days later. Four fledged on 10 May, one the next day. House Finches were also observed at feeders in Clinton, Custer County, west-central Oklahoma, in the early spring of 1983, and it appears likely that they may be nesting there as well (*vide*, Harriett Pedigo).

House Finches have been seen at several other locations in southwestern Oklahoma over the past 20 years. J. D. Ligon saw a single female-like bird 4 miles southwest of Hollis, Harmon County, on 6 August 1964 (Sutton, 1967, *loc. lit.*). Mrs. V. E. Estes saw a male in Altus, Jackson County, on 10-12 and 28 January 1973 (Tyler, J. D., 1979, *Birds of southwestern Oklahoma*, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 50), and Mrs. Brown observed a singing male there on 2 and 14 June 1979. In Lawton, Comanche County, the species was first reported on 11 July 1978 by Leonard and Esther Beavers. Since then, the birds have apparently become regular winter visitants in Lawton, having been seen repeatedly by the Beavers and Janet M. McGee from 1979 through March 1983. No nest has been found there (*vide*, Jack D. Tyler).

That House Finches have moved into west-central and southwestern Oklahoma should not be surprising, since the species has long been common in adjacent areas of Texas. Since 1978, as reported in *American Birds*, it has been recorded on every Christmas Count in Amarillo and on every count but one in Wichita Falls, which is scarcely 20 miles south of the Oklahoma border. The bird is also increasing rapidly in Kansas. As examples, in 1976 it nested in northwestern Kansas (Williams, F., 1979, *Am. Birds* 33:294); in 1983, 250 of them were banded at Hays City (Williams, F., 1983, *Am. Birds* 37:1004); and the species has been reported eastward almost to the Missouri border (Williams, F., 1979, *loc. cit.*).

In the Oklahoma Panhandle, no sightings were recorded east of Boise City until 1981. On 25 February of that year Kurt Schaefer, Professor of Biology at Panhandle State University in Goodwell, Texas County, saw one there (Sutton Summary, *op. cit.*). On 16 April 1984, John S. Shackford saw a pair fly from an eight-foot juniper tree near the Biology Building on the campus. They had flown from what appeared to be a half-finished nest, although Shackford could not be certain it was not an old nest. Upon inquiring, he was informed by Schaefer that in recent years, House Finches had nested in "every one" of four or five tall junipers near the building. Shackford noted that there were, in fact, old nests of some sort in virtually every upright juniper. Later, he saw and heard singing what may have been a second male on the opposite side of the building. On 26 June 1983, in Beaver, Beaver County, Shackford had watched a male as it sang from a telephone wire (*vide*, John S. Shackford).

For central Oklahoma, three sightings are on record. A single bird was seen by George M. Sutton at Hospital Lake (now the Sutton Urban Wilderness) in Norman, Cleveland County, on 14 September, 1968 (Sutton, G. M., 1974, *A check-list of Oklahoma birds*, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 43). On 16 February 1979, in Wakita, Grant County, north-central Oklahoma, L. L. Byfield and his wife Ann saw a male in their yard (Byfield,

L. L., 1979, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 12:34). On 20 February 1984 *Carpodacus mexicanus* was observed in Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, for the first time. At about 1630, on a feeding tray in his backyard on the near-northwest side of Oklahoma City, Mitchell Oliphant discovered a male House Finch. This bird Oliphant saw almost daily for a month after the initial sighting. It was banded and photographed on 12 March 1984, but continued to visit the feeder after being released. It was not seen again after 20 March.

The increasing number of House Finch sightings eastward in Oklahoma and elsewhere during recent years strongly implies that the species' range expansion is continuing.

3116 N. VIRGINIA, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73118 AND 106 SUNSET, ELK CITY, OKLAHOMA 73644,
12 APRIL, 1984.

THE CURVE-BILLED THRASHER IN SOUTHWESTERN OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN W. AULT III

The Curve-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma curvirostre*) is a resident of the thorn scrub, semidesert shrublands, brush and cactus country of the arid southwestern United States. It reaches the northeastern limits of its range along an irregular line through northeastern New Mexico, southeastern Colorado, extreme western Oklahoma (Black Mesa region), and southwestern Kansas (1983, American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American birds, 6th ed., p. 572). H. C. Oberholser (1974, The bird life of Texas, Vol. 2, Univ. Texas Press, Austin, p. 653, gives the Texas range as "resident . . . in Trans-Pecos, southern Panhandle, and south Texas brush country; uncommon in middle Panhandle . . . north locally and irregularly to northern Panhandle (non-breeders) . . .". However, occasional vagrants show up far outside this range and have been reported as far north as Manitoba, Nebraska and Wisconsin, west to the coast of southern California, and east to Florida, one even in New Hampshire (see map in Newlon, M. C., 1981, Iowa Bird Life 51:23).

Toxostoma curvirostre was first reported from Oklahoma in September 1933 by George M. Sutton (1934, Ann. Carnegie Mus. 24:35-36), who also discovered the first nest on 5 June 1936 near Kenton, in northwestern Cimarron County (1936, Auk 53:434). At that time the species was considered rare. It has been more frequently recorded since its discovery, but has not extended its range eastward (Sutton, G. M., 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 425). Sutton wrote that walkingstick cholla cactus (*Opuntia imbricata*), which was used exclusively as a nesting site in Cimarron County, appeared to have been the factor limiting the species' range (1948, Condor 50:40-43).

Published Oklahoma records for the species east of the Black Mesa have been from the following counties: Ellis, 26 December 1968 (Sutton, G. M., 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 31); Beckham, 3-10 January 1971 (Sutton, 1974, *loc. cit.*); Jackson, late January to 24 February 1965 (Sutton, G. M., 1968, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 1:19), 12 and 31 October 1972, and 20 November 1973 (Sutton, 1974, *loc. cit.*); Kiowa, 27 March to 7 April 1968 (Carlton, B., 1968, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 1:19-20); Comanche, 1, 18, and 29 December, 1976 (Fears,