

A TEMPORARY COLONY OF LESSER GOLDFINCHES
IN CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN G. NEWELL

Two color morphs of the male Lesser Goldfinch, *Carduelis psaltria*, are known: a largely black-backed bird that seasonally occupies the area from Colorado southward through portions of New Mexico, the Oklahoma Panhandle and west Texas into Mexico, and a green-backed form occurring westward to the Pacific Coast, thence south through California, Arizona, and parts of New Mexico and adjacent Mexico. The males which I have seen on the east slope of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle and in the Edwards Plateau of Texas have, with few exceptions, been black-backed.



MALE LESSER GOLDFINCH

Black-backed male photographed by John S. Shackford near Meridian State Park, Central Texas, on 4 April, 1976. This location is 260 miles south of Red Rock Canyon State Park, Oklahoma.

Except for Cimarron County, records in Oklahoma have come principally from the southwestern section where the species is a rare or uncommon migrant and summer resident (Tyler, J. D., *Birds of Southwestern Oklahoma*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 50), but no nesting records are known there. Even in Cimarron County, a popular area for ornithological field studies, few nests have been discovered.

On 20 May 1967, I and several participants of a field trip to Methodist Canyon Camp in southwestern Canadian and adjacent Caddo counties, were surprised to find a small flock of Lesser Goldfinches feeding in grass near the dining hall. In an effort to learn more about them, I began to make periodic visits to this and adjacent canyon areas, visits that were to continue for the next 13 years. My field notes through 1980 encompass more than 130 trips and hundreds of hours spent investigating Red Rock Canyon State Park near Hinton and nearby Methodist Canyon, the only places I was ever able to locate the goldfinches. These records, filed with the Stovall Museum at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, confirm that for a number of years, Lesser Goldfinches were residents of these protected canyons from the middle of May into early October, with exceptional dates of 10 May and 19 October.

Counts of the Lesser Goldfinches are only estimates. Because the little birds were extremely active and the foliage rather dense, I could enumerate them only when they ventured into open areas about campgrounds, buildings or playgrounds. During the summer, the canyons were crowded and noisy with campers. For this reason, early morning observations were the most fruitful. The largest number of birds I counted in Methodist Canyon was five. I saw both males and females during May and June, but few if any females in July and early August.

On 25 May 1969, two years after discovering Lesser Goldfinches in Methodist Canyon, I found them in Red Rock Canyon State Park, a few miles to the west. That day I saw four or more, including two black-backed males.

When I next visited the park on 16 September 1969, I was amazed by the presence of no fewer than 50 goldfinches scattered throughout open places in the park! Eight or ten black-backed males were still actively singing and chasing, even at this fairly late date. I could not be certain that some birds in female-like plumage were not young males. The adult males alternately sang, chased other males from their territories, circled in great arcs or performed exquisite "butterfly" flight displays near females. A high, dead branch was usually chosen from which to display, and they frequently stretched to full height while calling exuberantly "tee-dee" (last note higher) or "tee-yur" (last syllable slurred downward). Sometimes they broke into full, continuous song and it was not unusual for them to be the only species singing during the intense heat of midday.

The goldfinches sometimes mimicked the songs of other species. On one occasion, I watched a "poorly colored" male as it sang quietly in the shade. Although he sounded far away, he was actually only 12 or 15 feet distant. In an elfin voice, he included in his rendition a Tufted Titmouse (*Parus bicolor*), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila caerulea*), Rufous-crowned Sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps*), and Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), clearly and distinctly.

I heard another male imitate a Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) and Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) to perfection.

Next day (17 September), Nelson Hall and I found the goldfinches equally abundant. Ten days later, I led a group of Oklahoma City Audubon Society members to the park where we found 30 or so goldfinches, including several bright males. During my last visit that season, I drove Margaret and Henry Walter to the park on 19 October and observed from 15 to 20 birds, including five black-backed males in bright feather and one with a greenish back. The large number of birds encountered on these last trips might have represented migrating goldfinches, or possibly a gathering of birds from drier areas outside the park to more attractive feeding and drinking spots within it. However, I suspect that many of these were young birds that had been reared locally. There were just too many in the number clad in female-like plumage for me to believe otherwise.

In 1970, I returned to Red Rock Canyon State Park repeatedly, hoping to locate a nest. On 22 May, Brad Carlton advised me that he had seen Lesser Goldfinches there. On the following day, I found at least four males in the park, some apparently moulting about the head. They were singing, chasing, and sometimes displaying in deliberate "butterfly flight" with wings and tail wide-spread. Strangely, I could find only two females.

When I returned on 7 June, I watched at least five males which seemed to have established definite territories, but no female could I locate. During subsequent visits on 14, 20, and 26 June and on 5 July, the situation had not changed.

On 12 July, I again found four or five adult males and saw one fly to a small, scraggly red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) standing alone between a playground swing-set and the road through the canyon. I checked the tree and found a nest about 16 feet above ground. It could hardly have been situated in a noisier place, with human activity all about, but there was a female or large chick in the nest. On the evening of 14 July, between 1930 and 2100, I was observing the nest closely when I saw the male fly in. The nest contained two large, well-feathered young birds; I hoped that they were not Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*). On the morning of 18 July, a number of friends accompanied me to the nest, including Nelson Hall, Ora and Al Reed, Brooks and Thula Parkhill, Vic Vacin, Walter Doane, Warren Harden, and George M. Sutton. Brooks Parkhill attempted to take photos of the nest, but it was too well hidden in the cedar branches. The parents flew in to feed the two active young even as Parkhill stood on a ladder not three feet from the nest! The chicks were ready to fledge, and one did so, flying across the road into some trees about 50 feet away.

Sutton found a female bird building a second nest approximately 100 yards from the first and about 32 feet up on one of the uppermost branches of a large cedar tree. This bird appeared to be constructing the nest with fibers of cedar bark. Once, she tried unsuccessfully to pull off pieces of a kite string draped over a limb. While we watched, a male flew in and copulated with her twice.

On 26 July, the first nest was empty and a female appeared to be incubating eggs in the second. We saw black-backed males repeatedly and one green-backed

male that sang as often as did the others. Two large fledglings noisily pursued a male for food; when they finally caught him, he hung upside down from a branch as the young fought to take the tidbit from his bill.

A visit to Red Rock Canyon on 2 August revealed that the female at nest two was still incubating. At least three males were yet actively singing. Near this nest we saw three youngsters chasing a male and begging food. On 9 August, the female on nest two seemed to be brooding; she frequently arose and looked under her body, and as the sun climbed higher, she stood over the nest with partially raised wings. Two days later, she was still on the nest and moved around a good deal, but I saw no young birds.

On 19 September, Sutton collected both nests for the Stovall Museum at the University of Oklahoma. Nest one was broken during the process, but nest two he recovered intact, noting that the inside was dirty, as if used by young birds. Its outside diameter measured $2\frac{5}{8}$ inches, the bowl $1\frac{3}{4}$ x 2 inches, and the depth about 1 inch. Distances to the nearest known nesting areas are 280 miles to Cimarron County, Oklahoma (Sutton, G. M., 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 596), and about 200 miles to Palo Duro Canyon in the Texas Panhandle (Stevenson, J. O., 1942, Condor 44:115).

Three adult males and ten or more female-like birds I found in the brush along the west canyon wall on 27 September. They appeared to be eating something from a freshly exposed sandstone rock surface.

Between 1971 and 1980 I continued to monitor the Lesser Goldfinches in both canyons. Although I located no more nests, I observed as many as five bright males in the park through 1973. The males were very aggressive after establishing territories. There were at least five territories in the playground area on 11 July 1971, and I observed several territorial skirmishes. On 25 July, a female flew across to the small stream to drink and bathe. As she crossed the open area, three males, apparently from adjoining territories, darted down to follow, met in the air a few feet from the ground and tumbled earthward in the most vicious three-way fight I've ever seen. They resembled a group of black and white butterflies. From 1974 through 1979 it was unusual to see even two or three males. Only rarely did I observe a female-plumaged bird. I did see two males on 3 August 1980, but none has been found since.

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AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS KILLED BY HAILSTORM IN DEWEY COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY ALAN STACEY

Dewey County lies near the heart of west central Oklahoma. Two major rivers, the North and South Canadian, meander from west to east through the county. A portion of Canton Lake, a major impoundment of the North Canadian, lies in the northeastern corner. During migration, considerable numbers of waterfowl, as well as many shorebirds and other aquatic species, spend time at Canton Lake and the numerous farm ponds and croplands in the area. The American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) is a regular transient