

OKLAHOMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

RED CROSSBILLS IN OKLAHOMA DURING THE WINTER OF 1990-91

BY SHIRLEY L. McFARLAND

Beginning 28 January 1991, flocks of Red Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra*) numbering from the six I saw that day to 36 on 12 May, appeared at feeders and heated birdbaths in my yard in northwest Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. I constantly replenished two feeders with thistle seeds, four with "black oil" sunflower seeds. My house is at the edge of a golf course, and neighbors living across it to the east had seen crossbills at least a week prior to my first sighting.

These birds were extremely tame, sometimes allowing observers to approach to within three feet or less. Often, when they were present but not visible, I could hear their unmistakable finchlike "cheeps." Although the crossbills seemed to relish both types of seeds in the feeders, I occasionally saw them clinging to the balls of sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) and sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) trees as they extracted the seeds. They usually came to the yard twice daily: once around 0800-0830, and again right after lunch, but I seldom saw them after 1400.



RED CROSSBILL

Male in first breeding plumage. Note mixture of red, yellow and green feathers. Photo taken by George S. Hansen on 25 May 1991 at the home of Shirley L. McFarland in northwest Oklahoma City.

Their numbers in my yard began to build toward the end of April, when my neighbor who lives about a quarter of a mile to the ENE and directly across the golf course, ceased to fill her feeders. After this time, the crossbills arrived *en masse*, and I could count on seeing them every two hours or more often. They fed in a group, flew about together, and all departed simultaneously. Their close-knit flocking behavior was similar to that of Cedar Waxwings (*Bombycilla cedrorum*). At any time of the day, however, there was nearly always a crossbill or two in the yard. After 12 May, when I counted 36, fewer birds came, until by 22 May, only about a dozen arrived. The male and two female crossbills that visited the feeders on 6 June and the pair that came next day were the last I saw. This date is nearly a month later than the latest in spring recorded by Sutton (1974, *A check-list of Oklahoma birds*, Contrib. Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist. No. 1, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 44) of 9 May. On that date in 1961, F.M. Baumgartner reported the species at Stillwater in Payne County (*Aud. Field Notes* 15:423, 1961).

According to records kept by John G. Newell, the earliest Oklahoma City record for this season was on 27 October 1990, when Jack Roberts saw one or two fly over his home. Subsequent sightings of crossbills in the area included a flock of about 25 Newell observed eating sunflower seeds at the Lake Hefner Golf Course on 19 November; two seen in Nichols Hills by Sam Moore on 15 December; five that John S. Shackford found on 16 February 1991 near Rose Hill Cemetery; and a flock of "20 to 30" that was reported in northwest Oklahoma City by Dr. Karl Boatman on 8 March. Ten were also recorded on the Oklahoma City Christmas Bird Count of 15 December 1990 (*Am. Birds* 45:867, 1991).

In Choctaw, a few miles to the east, Eldora Morgan saw four males and a female Red Crossbill in her yard on 10 and 11 March (*vide*, N. Garrison). Just northeast of Oklahoma City, Diane Lowe also observed at least 30 crossbills at her home in Edmond on 16 March, 1991 (pers. comm.). To the south, in Norman, Cleveland County, persons in at least three separate locations saw up to 10 crossbills between 11 November 1990 and 6 June 1991 (*vide*, P. Bergey; *Am. Birds* 45:468, 1991).

During a trip to Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, northwestern Oklahoma, Jeri McMahon, J.L. Norman, *et al.* saw 12 crossbills in a sunflower patch on 4 November 1990; McMahon's color photograph of a male was reproduced in *American Birds* (45:175, 1991). Not far to the southwest, in Woodward, Woodward County, John S. Shackford watched nine crossbills pick buds from an American elm (*Ulmus americana*) on 21 April 1991. At the other end of the state, in Broken Bow, McCurtain County, J. Loyd, Pat Seibert and Dee Isted watched in astonishment as a huge bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*) swallowed a Red Crossbill in female-like plumage "about 15 June," 1991 (*vide*, J. L. Norman). A few crossbills appeared in northeastern Oklahoma: at Grove, in Delaware County, a pair visited the residence of Bill and Ellie Womack on 8 and 9 June 1991 and were photographed by several people; in Tulsa, Tulsa County, J. Home and others saw two birds on 7 March 1991 (both *vide*, J. Grzybowski).

In Lawton, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma, a male captured and dropped by a Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) on 24 December 1990 was retrieved by William Morris and is now in the Cameron University Museum of Zoology. On 6 May 1991, Morris saw three males in his yard, and reported that they had been there sporadically since mid-March. In Stephens County, Julie Goode Couch saw "a flock" in Duncan on 18 April (*The Kite* 24(5):3, 1991).

About 25 miles south of Cotton County, Oklahoma, in Wichita Falls, Wichita

County, Texas, Rue Branch watched as a male Red Crossbill drank water at a basin in her yard on 1 April 1991. The following day, a pair arrived. Early on 3 April, at least six came (pers. comm.). At about 0720 on 4 April, two crossbills were in her yard, where Nancy Moorehead also observed them. The two birds reappeared for the last time about 1130 the next day.

3600 QUAIL CREEK ROAD, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73120, 15 JULY 1991.

GENERAL NOTES

Unusual feeding behavior of Great Blue Heron. —At 1100 on 27 January 1991, I observed a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) perform a fishing technique unfamiliar to me. When first noticed, the heron was flying south 4 to 6 feet above deep water approximately 30 yards off the east shore of Tom Steed Reservoir in Kiowa County, Oklahoma, not far north of the dam. The temperature was about 50°F, the day sunny, and light wind was blowing from the ENE. The bird had not progressed far when suddenly, it abruptly turned and headed back north several yards, apparently to a predetermined point, where it paused briefly in air before reaching down a few inches into the water with its feet, apparently attempting to catch a fish. Having missed its intended prey, the heron turned and flew eastward toward the rocky bank. Before reaching shore however, it circled back out over the lake to a spot a little distance from where it had wet its feet, let its body softly down into the water, and floated momentarily. The object of its attention was a small fish 5 or 6 inches long (and probably dead) which it quickly grasped in its bill, then it lifted off and headed east again. Hardly had it gotten underway, when the fish dropped back into the water. Undaunted, the heron doubled back and repeated its “floating-feeding” behavior. This time, however, it reached the shore, fish in bill.

The various feeding techniques employed by herons have been well described and categorized by ethologists. The general type of behavior I witnessed is known as “deep water feeding,” and several strategies are employed for this. The closest description to my initial observation is known as “foot dragging” (Kushlan, J.A., 1972, *Wilson Bull.* 84:199-200). A heron in flight above the water drags the toes or foot of one or both legs in the water and strikes prey at the surface while continuing in forward flight. This type of feeding is apparently unknown for the Great Blue Heron. The heron I saw did not drag its feet, but “stabbed” with them, much like an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*). Furthermore, it hovered briefly before striking, rather than doing so while in unbroken flight. In “feet first diving,” a heron alights on the water, usually from a hovering position, and stabs at prey as soon as it lands (Kushlan, J.A., 1976, *Auk* 93:86-94). This behavior has occasionally been observed in *Ardea herodias*. Another infrequent method is “swimming feeding” (Kushlan, J.A., 1973, *Florida Field Nat.* 1:27-28), in which a swimming bird strikes at prey near it with the bill, usually after a feet first dive. In these cases, the heron ordinarily takes off quickly after feeding. This behavior I saw twice after the heron’s first attempt to catch prey. —Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 5 February 1991.*

Black-crowned Night-Heron in Wichita County, Texas, in winter. —On 17 December 1989, June McKee and I observed an immature Black-crowned Night-Heron