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A history of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, the state bird of Oklahoma

BY JOHN S. TOMER

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*) is the state bird of Oklahoma. Its breeding range on the southern Great Plains encompasses all of Oklahoma, most of Kansas, southwestern Missouri, western Arkansas and Louisiana, and most of Texas (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). It is present in Oklahoma largely from the last week in March until the first week in November (Grzybowski et al. 1992). It winters in southern Mexico and Central America (Regosin 1998). The natural history of the species has been summarized by Bent (1942) and Regosin (1998).

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was not the first species chosen as Oklahoma's state bird. In the late 1920's the General Federation of



Fig. 1. The first published illustration of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher from Daubenton's *Planches Enlumines*, 1765-1780. From the collection of the author.

Women's Clubs under Katherine B. Tippetts, Chairman of the Division of Conservation, conducted a campaign to have each state name a state bird. The Oklahoma chapter, under Mrs. W. A. Campbell and Mrs. Ellen Howard Miller, polled the state and received 69,000 votes, of which the majority were for the Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*; Tippetts 1932). However, no action was taken to have the state legislature officially declare the Northern Bobwhite as the state bird, and it was shown on state bird lists as the "unofficial" state bird (Kieran 1948).

In 1947, John and Margaret Galley of the Tulsa Audubon Society, after conferring with M. M. Nice and R. T. Peterson, suggested that the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher be officially named as Oklahoma's state bird. This was submitted to the state legislature in 1950 by the Tulsa Audubon Society and drafted by the Attorney General. The proposal passed the Senate but did not get through the House of Representatives.

At that time Bess Smith, of the Tulsa Audubon Society, gathered forces with sportsmen, garden clubs, and bird clubs of the state, and took the proposal back to the 1951 legislature where Lou Allard of Drumright, who was chairman of a House fish and game committee, drafted House Joint Resolution Number 21 to have the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher named as the state bird (Creager 1952). This time it passed the Senate and House and was signed by Governor Johnson Murray on 26 May 1951, making the species the official state bird (Anonymous 1951).

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher appeared in literature for the first time in a book published in Paris in 1765–1780 by Louis Jean Marie Daubenton. The book, known as *Daubenton's Plaanches Enlumines*, is a collection of 1008 animal pictures, 973 of which are birds. It has no title page and no text. The plates each have a title, the common name of the bird depicted. Linnaean nomenclature was not used. The illustrations are hand-colored engravings, 48.5 x 34.5 cm., drawn by the French artist Francois Nicolet Martinet (Cowan 1967; Cowan 1968). The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher appears on Plate 677, entitled, "Gobe-mouche a queue fourchue du Mexique" (Fig. 1). It was apparently drawn from a specimen sent to France from Mexico by M. de Boynes, Secretary for the Marine Department, with whom Daubenton communicated (Smellie 1793).

George Louis Buffon used the Daubenton *Plaanches* in the bird volumes 16–24 of his massive 44-volume *Histoire Naturelle Generale* published in 1749–1804 (Mengel 1972–1983). The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher discussion appears in volume 19 from 1778 on pages 564–565. Buffon, simultaneously in 1770–1786, published the bird portion of the *Histoire Naturelle Generale* as the ten-volume *Historie Naturelle des Oiseau*. The Scissortail Flycatcher discussion appears in volume 5 from 1778 on pages 269–70. Both of these publications contained text describing the birds, and they represent the first time the Scissor-tail Flycatcher was described in the literature. The birds were described only under the common name, as Linnaean nomenclature was not used.

After Buffon's first bird publications, John Latham, in 1781–1785, published a three-volume book, *A General Synopsis of Birds*. This was an illustrated bird book with text in English. The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was described under the name, "SWALLOW TAILED FL." , in part 1, volume 2, 1783, on page 356. It was not illustrated, and again it was not given a Linnaean binomial.

In 1788, Johann Frederick Gmelin included the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in his 13th edition of Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, giving it the Latin name, *Muscicapa forficata*. He also wrote that the species had appeared in the literature as "Moucherolle a queue fourchue du Mexique" in Buffon's *Historie Naturelle des Oiseaux* and as the "Swallow-tailed Flycatcher" in Latham's *A General Synopsis of Birds*. Thus Gmelin was the first to publish a proper scientific name, *Muscicapa forficata*, and is credited with naming the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher.

Since then, the generic name has changed several times (Ridgway 1907). It was changed to *Milvulus* by Swainson (1837) and to *Muscivora* by Oberholser (1901), with the latter change adopted by the A.O.U. in 1957. Smith (1966) later suggested changing the generic name to *Tyrannus*, a suggestion supported by Traylor (1977) and later adopted by the A.O.U. in their 1983 *Check-list of North American Birds*. The specific name, an adjective, was changed from *forficata* to *forficatus* to agree with the gender of the generic name (Regosin 1998).

The vernacular name of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, when it was first published, was "Gobe-mouche a queue fourchue du Mexique" (English translation, "Fork-tailed flycatcher of Mexico") in Daubenton's and Buffon's French publications (Daubenton 1765–1780; Buffon 1749–1804; Buffon 1770–1786). It was the "Swallow-tailed Flycatcher" in the first English publications (Latham 1783). Later the American Ornithologists' Union's first edition of the *Check-list of North American Birds* in 1886 referred to the species as the "Scissor-tailed Flycatcher". This has been the English name of the species in all A.O.U. check-lists since. The A.O.U. has been followed in most subsequent ornithological literature. Conversationally, the species is spoken of as the "Scissortail," and it has also been known as "The Texas Bird of Paradise."

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher first appeared in American bird books when Charles Lucien Bonaparte added the then recently discovered American species to Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology* in 1825 (Bonaparte 1825–1833). Bonaparte hired the artist-naturalist, Titian Ramsay Peale as artist. Peale had accompanied the Long expedition to the Rocky Mountains (Poesch 1961). Among the species drawn by Peale was the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. Bonaparte wrote that Peale had seen and collected the species 24 August 1820 on the Canadian River. On this day the Long expedition was northeast of the present town of Hydro in the southwest corner of Blaine County, Oklahoma (Goodman and Lawson 1995). Peale used this specimen to make the drawing for the Bonaparte book (Fig. 2). It was number 6623 of the Peale Museum in Philadelphia.



Fig. 2. The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher from a specimen collected on Oklahoma lands in 1820 by T. R. Peale and illustrated by Peale for Bonaparte's *American Ornithology*, 1825–1833. From the collection of the author.

It apparently did not survive through the years, as it was not listed when the remnants of this collection were studied by Faxon (1915).

Students of Oklahoma ornithology have included the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher on every state bird list since the first listing by Woodhouse in 1858 (Tomer 1997). The first record of the Scissortail in Oklahoma, however, was by Thomas Nuttall, who wrote that he had found the species nesting as he traveled south along the Kiamichi River to the Red River in May of 1819 in southeastern Indian Territory, likely in present Pushmataha or Choctaw County, Oklahoma (Nuttall 1832).

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Winter habitat of the Smith's Longspur in Oklahoma

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The Smith's Longspur (*Calcarius pictus*) winters primarily in the southern Great Plains and breeds in the arctic (Briskie 1993). Inhabiting grasslands and prairies and often nomadic on the wintering range, the species is difficult to observe and study, and consequently little is known about winter flock composition and site fidelity (Dunn and Dunn 1999). We lack basic information on the winter ecology of the Smith's Longspur, and this has complicated efforts to formulate conservation and management plans for the nonbreeding season (Briskie 1993). The objective of my study was to determine what habitat characteristics are preferred by Smith's Longspurs in Oklahoma in winter.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

I selected study sites based on data provided by J. Hoffman (pers. comm). Based on censuses taken by Hoffman in the winter of 1998–1999, I chose 14 representative sites in northeastern Oklahoma (Table 1) where Smith's Longspurs were known to occur. My measure of longspur use of a site was the maximum single-day count of Smith's Longspurs by Hoffman in the winter of 1998–1999. Most of the study sites were used as hay fields, although cattle had grazed two fields and one was a park area for a subdivision. Each site had a source of water on or near the premises, most often ponds and creeks. Presence or absence of grazing activity by livestock was noted for each site.

I sampled vegetation from early January 1999 through mid March 1999. I used 30 sampling plots at each field. I randomly determined the position of each sample by assigning numbers to the four corners of a field and using a random number table to determine which corner to start from. I used a random numbers table to select compass points at 30-de-