

PHOTOGRAPHIC CONFIRMATION OF SCALED QUAIL IN ELLIS COUNTY

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Abstract—In June 2013, during the course of wildlife surveys at the Packsaddle Wildlife Management area in Ellis County, two Scaled Quail (*Callipepla squamata*) were observed and photographed. The species occurs in the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, and into the southwestern corner of Oklahoma; Ellis County is outside the currently recognized distribution of the species in Oklahoma. We review the historical status of Scaled Quail in Oklahoma, much of it from undocumented sources. Our observation represents, at least, the first confirmed record of this species in Ellis County. While we cannot exclude the potential of local releases, these birds may have dispersed from populations in the adjacent Texas Panhandle.

OBSERVATIONS

On 16 June 2013, while conducting a routine survey for raptors and Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) at Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Ellis County, Atuo and Hillis observed two Scaled Quail (*Callipepla squamata*) near the Dunn Unit section of the WMA. Viewing conditions were excellent at the time of the sighting (06:47 CDT), with clear skies, light winds (3.1 ms^{-1}), and an air temperature of 26°C (Oklahoma Mesonet 2013). We initially thought the birds were Northern Bobwhite but we soon noticed the white crest and scaly appearance to the contour feathers that identified them as Scaled Quail. We observed the birds for approximately 3 minutes through 10x40 binoculars at a distance of less than 50 m, and obtained several photographs (Fig. 1). The birds remained close to each other during the observation, and were actively foraging; one captured an insect from the ground.

DISCUSSION

Scaled Quail is generally restricted to the arid grasslands of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States (Dabbert *et al.* 2009). In Oklahoma, Scaled Quail occurs in the Panhandle (Schemnitz 1961, 1964) as well as in Harmon, Greer, and Jackson counties in the southwestern corner of the State (OBRC 2009). This distribution produces an apparent gap in Oklahoma, but the occurrence is contiguous across the Texas Panhandle (Seyffert 2001). The location of our sighting in Ellis County is outside the generally accepted range of Scaled Quail in Oklahoma. There

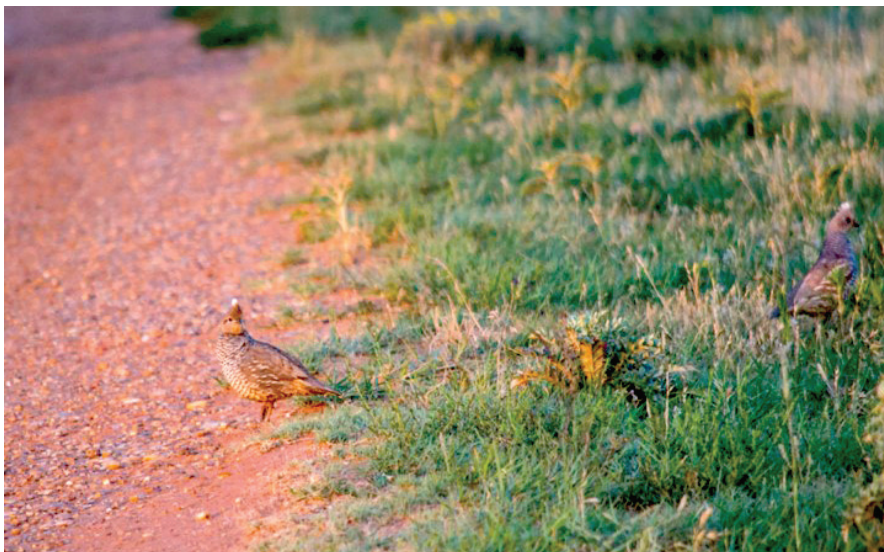


Figure. 1. Scaled Quail photographed at the Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area, Ellis County, OK, 16 June 2013. Photo by Nathan Hillis.

were no Ellis County records for Scaled Quail in the Oklahoma Breeding Bird Atlas (Reinking 2004), none are recognized by the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee (OBRC 2009), and none have been recorded in eBird (Sullivan *et al.* 2009).

Both Sutton (1967) and Baumgartner and Baumgartner (1992) mention the rare and irregular occurrence of Scaled Quail outside of the two known areas of the Oklahoma distribution including north to Beckham, Greer, Kiowa, Comanche, and Stephens counties in the main body of the State. Scaled Quail were reported to have occurred eastward to Harper, Ellis, Roger Mills, and Washita counties in the northwest (Duck and Fletcher 1945), and occasional sightings (non-verified) have been reported even farther east in the state. However, these sources do not offer any specific information on those occurrences. For example, the assertion by Duck and Fletcher (1945) of occasional Ellis County reports comes from anecdotal accounts predating 1900. We received personal communications from staff of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation who reported occasional encounters with Ellis County Scaled Quail from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Of these, the most specific originated with Lewis Jennings who reported hunting a covey of 25–35 one day in the 1980s, harvesting approximately 10 (Jennings 2014).

We found no specific records of Scaled Quail in Ellis County since the 1980s until recent sightings were reported at The Nature Conservancy's Four Canyon Preserve, approximately 16 km northeast of Packsaddle WMA. Patten *et al.* (2006) summarized inventory efforts for breeding

birds conducted at the Preserve in 2005. Those inventory efforts included observations of Scaled Quail, prompting the authors to include it among the “possible” nesting species at Four Canyon Preserve.

We considered the possibility that the birds could have been pen-reared and released in the area. Neither individual was marked with a leg band or other marker that could potentially identify it as a released bird; both exhibited predictable escape behavior by running for more dense cover on our approach. Although we are unable to rule out the possibility that they were released in the area, or are products of released birds, our observation was consistent with expectations for wild birds, including our own recent and frequent observations of Scaled Quail in Beaver County, OK.

Packsaddle WMA includes approximately 6,475 ha consisting mainly of mixed-grass prairie and shinnery oak (*Quercus havardii*) (DeMaso *et al.* 1997) portions of which seem to provide suitable habitat for Scaled Quail. The nearest known occurrence is approximately 50 km away in Hemphill County, Texas. Although Scaled Quail generally occupy smaller home ranges than other quail species, periodic long distance movements of over 70 km have been reported (Cantu *et al.* 2006). Given the location of Packsaddle WMA, it is likely that dispersal from Hemphill County, TX might be the source of the birds we encountered in Ellis County, OK. Based on our review of the published literature and communications with local wildlife managers, we conclude that Scaled Quail occurs at least occasionally in Ellis County, and that our photograph stands as the first confirmation of the species' occurrence in that county.

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MISSISSIPPI KITE PREDATION ON A FLEDGLING WESTERN KINGBIRD—

Historically, Mississippi Kites (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) were described as aerial insectivores (Bailey 1914, Bent 1937). More recent observations, however, have demonstrated considerable flexibility in diets. For example, Johnsgard (1990) and Parker (1999) list frogs, toads, turtles, lizards, snakes, bats, small rodents, and more than 14 species of birds in Mississippi Kite diets. In Oklahoma, Mississippi Kites have been observed attempting to catch and consume Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*), Purple Martin (*Progne subis*), House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*), Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*), Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*), and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) (summarized by Heck 2005). Here, we report on Mississippi Kite predation of a Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*).

We monitored Western Kingbird nests at Elmer Thomas Park, Lawton, Comanche County, Oklahoma (34° 37.249'N and 098° 23.670'W) from June through July 2013. Elmer Thomas Park is an urban park, with a man-made lake, manicured grass, planted native and non-native trees, and considerable human traffic. We searched the park daily for Western Kingbird nests, which were generally found during the construction phase. All nests were checked every one to two days and their status recorded until fledging of young or loss of the nest due to weather or predation. On 9 July 2013, a nest 5.42 m high in a 7.45 m tall American elm (*Ulmus americana*) had four nestlings perched on the edge of the nest, nearly ready to fledge. Quickle returned to this nest on 10 July to confirm what was expected to be the final fate of the nest. Upon arrival at the nest, he observed that two of the young were out of the nest and on the nest branch, and two nestlings remained in the nest. As observation data were being recorded in a field notebook, one of the nestlings flew from the nest towards a 12 m tall American elm about 39 m away. It flew parallel to the ground and attempted to land on a branch about 9 m high. Immediately before the fledgling could reach the new perch, an adult Mississippi Kite swooped from the air above, grabbed it in midair and flew away with the young kingbird in its talons. Both kingbird parents were near the nest at the time, but neither responded to the presence of the kite before or after the predation event.

To our knowledge, this is the first published account of predation of a Western Kingbird by a Mississippi Kite (they were not included as a prey item in Johnsgard 1990 or Parker 1974, 1988, 1999). Our observation adds to the growing list of avian prey taken by Mississippi Kites, and to the list of potential predators taking Western Kingbirds. Given the common co-occurrence of both species in Oklahoma urban habitats, such interactions may be more common than current literature suggest. While adult Western Kingbirds are generally intolerant of predatory birds and respond aggressively towards them (Gamble and Bergin 2012), they may also become habituated to their presence when nesting in close proximity to each other (M. S. Husak, pers. observations). Thus, the risk to recently fledged young birds may be exacerbated by reduced parental vigilance.

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