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FIRST RECORD FOR HEPATIC TANAGER IN OKLAHOMA

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Abstract—On 25 April 2009 I saw a Hepatic Tanager (*Piranga flava*) southwest of Boise City in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. This sighting was accepted by the Oklahoma Bird Records committee and has been added to Oklahoma's bird list.

On 25 April 2009, between 1500 and 1600 h, I noticed a red bird in a black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) tree in my yard 4.8 km south and 1.2 km west of Boise City, Cimarron County, Oklahoma. Knowing red birds are somewhat rare in the area, I began trying to photograph this elusive bird. The bird appeared to be a male tanager. The head, throat, and breast were bright red in direct sunlight, while the wings and tail feathers gave way to a browner, almost burnt orange color. The bill was a dark slate color, almost black. Behind and below the eye was a cheek patch which, in good light at a close distance, was easily distinguishable as a brownish-gray color in a background of red. The upper back area behind the nape was quite different with mottled area of gray, brown, and red that created an unusual hue in certain light.

I began photographing the bird as it flew from perch to perch, first in the walnut, then to a row of pines. After reviewing a photo taken in the pines (Fig. 1), I was fairly sure what species it was, but I still ran to the house for a quick check of my field guide. The bird had flown south and I feared it would continue southward all the way to the cottonwood trees on the Beaver River (North Canadian River) about 1.2 km away. Nevertheless, it flew northward again to a row of pines on the western edge of the farm. I later e-mailed several of the photos to Steve Metz who confirmed my identification of the photograph as a male Hepatic tanager (*Piranga flava*). I also sent documentation to the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee, which approved it as the first record of a Hepatic Tanager in Oklahoma.

Fig 1. Male Hepatic tanager *(Piranga flava)* photographed by author on 25 April 2009 in Cimarron County, Oklahoma

I saw the bird again later that afternoon, and at 1 point it flew right over me, maybe 1–2 m above my head. There were strong thunderstorms developing in the east and winds had increased, switching from the north to the east. At about 1830 h, I looked again for the bird to no avail. I checked 2 places to the west of our farmstead and in the Boise City Cemetery 4.8 km north of our yard, but I could not relocate the bird.

On 22 April 2006, about 80 km to the northeast near Elkhart, Kansas, a male Hepatic Tanager was spotted and documented by Pete Janzen, Jan Cornelius, and Jerry Martin. Because of this sighting, the Hepatic Tanager was given hypothetical status in Kansas (Kansas Birds Record Committee 2006). In Colorado, scrutiny of ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) woodlands in the southeastern part of the state suggest that Hepatic Tanagers are regular breeders there (Semo 2007).

Cimarron County is a great location for birding as it is the crossroads for bird species from the desert southwest, Rocky Mountains, and eastern Oklahoma and lies in the path of a major migration flyway. In the very first Bulletin of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society, John S. Weske (1968) published an article listing 15 bird species that Adolph J. Krehbiel and his associates had seen in and around Clayton, Union County, New Mexico, but had not been reported from Oklahoma. One of these was the Hepatic Tanager, which now stands as a new addition to the official state bird list of Oklahoma.

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Brown-headed Cowbird Parasitism of an Incomplete Orchard Oriole Nest.— Successful nest parasitism for Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) is dependent on the females' ability to locate suitable host nests in the proper stage of clutch development. The most suitable cowbird hosts are insectivorous passerines that either accept or cannot distinguish cowbird eggs from their own or lack the ability to remove cowbird eggs from within their clutch (Peer et al. 2005). However, numerous instances of aberrant nest parasitism have been reported for cowbirds, such as egg-laying into inactive and depredated nests (Freeman et al. 1990), artificial nests (Coppedge 2009), and nests of unsuitable hosts such as ducks, doves, and raptors (Friedmann and Kiff 1985). We report here on another unusual instance of parasitism in which a cowbird egg was deposited in an Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurious*) nest still in the earliest stages of construction.

On 29 May 2009 we were conducting nest searches at the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve (TGPP) in Osage County, Oklahoma (36°50 N, 96°25 W). We were searching specifically for Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) nests along

the edges of a 15 m diameter sand plum (*Prunus angustifolia*) thicket beside a small stream when we noticed a mass of material resembling a nest. Upon closer inspection we recognized it as the initial stages of an Orchard Oriole nest, a common nester in woody thickets at the TGPP. We were surprised to note the precarious structure, which was little more than a loosely woven platform located 145 cm above ground, contained a Brown-headed Cowbird egg (Fig. 1). The finely-speckled egg measured 21 x 17 mm, within the size range of eggs produced by female cowbirds (Ankney and Johnson 1985) but lacking the specks, blotches, overall coloration and distinctly oval shape of an Orchard Oriole egg (Baicich and Harrison 1997). Although we did not notice any Orchard Orioles in the immediate vicinity, we returned the egg to the nest structure and resumed our nest searching. We returned on 5 June 2009 to re-examine the nest and noted the cowbird egg was missing. No shell fragments could be located beneath the nest. Since no further construction had taken place it appeared that the nest was deserted by the orioles, perhaps in response to the parasitism event and prior to our initial discovery.

Cowbirds have been reported to parasitize up to 24% of Orchard Oriole nests in Osage County (Reinking 2004) and are frequent hosts in other studies in the southern Great Plains (Weins 1963, Hill 1976, Elliot 1978). Peer and Sealy (2004) classify Orchard Orioles as accepters of cowbird parasitism as their smaller bill size likely prevents them from grasping and ejecting cowbird eggs from their nests. Cowbird parasitism is particularly noteworthy as Orchard Orioles are generally considered single-brooded and their population is currently declining in Oklahoma (Reinking 2004). Recently however, Ligi and Omland (2007) reported that a third of the banded Orchard Orioles in their study attempted double-brooding and many pairs successfully reared a second brood. If Orchard Orioles do in fact have the potential for double-brooding, then the nest desertion we observed in this instance may not be as costly to reproductive efforts and may be a more common response to cowbird parasitism than previously documented for this poorly studied species.

Fig. 1. Incomplete Orchard Oriole nest discovered 29 May 2009 at the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Osage County, Oklahoma containing a Brown-headed Cowbird egg.

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Index of Bird Names
Vol. 43, 2010

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