

ISSN 0737-0393

# THE MISSISSIPPI KITE

Vol. 26(2)

December 1996



Periodical Published by the Mississippi Ornithological Society to Record and Further the Study of Mississippi Birdlife.

Vol. 26, No. 2

December 1996

Contents

SELECTION OF A STRAND LINE FOR NESTING BY LEAST TERNS:  
MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS  
... Jerome A. Jackson and William E. Davis, Jr. 17

BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING DUCKS AT YAZOO NATIONAL  
WILDLIFE REFUGE, MISSISSIPPI. ... Douglas R. Wood 20

A BROOD OF ALBINO EASTERN BLUEBIRDS IN MERIDIAN,  
MISSISSIPPI. ... Barry L. Jones and Lizabeth A. Jones 22

PREDATION OF A PEREGRINE ON A RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD THAT  
WAS MOBBING IT ....Charley Delmas 23

MOURNING DOVE NESTING PERSISTENCE .....Jerome A. Jackson 25

MOS OFFICERS AND MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION Back Cover

Cover: A Mourning Dove at its nest with two young, inches from a building being constructed in Starkville, Mississippi. (See page 25; Photo by Jerome A. Jackson.)

## SELECTION OF A STRAND LINE FOR NESTING BY LEAST TERNS: MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Jerome A. Jackson

and William E. Davis, Jr.

*Department of Biological Sciences  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, Mississippi 39762*

*College of General Studies  
Boston University  
Boston, Massachusetts 02215*

On 14 June 1992 we censused nesting Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*) along the Mississippi Gulf coast in Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson counties. In the course of our census at the largest of colonies (ca 2000 pairs; see Jackson and Jackson 1985 for history of this colony) on the man-made beach in Gulfport, Harrison County, we became aware of a non-random dispersion of nests. Since this is a man-made beach, it continually erodes away and is replenished by pumping sand in from Mississippi Sound. On our visit, the beach sands were quite depleted, such that a recent storm tide had reached halfway up the beach, depositing a distinct drift line of debris dominated by chips of pine bark (Figure 1). We were censusing nests (early in the day to avoid overheating of eggs) by walking transects parallel to the seawall. There were relatively few nests until we reached the strand line. Then we found an abundance of nests. Beyond the strand line, again, there were fewer nests. It was also clear that the tan, dark-spotted eggs were less conspicuous in the strand line because of the debris. Away from the strand line, the beach is uniform light-colored sand with very little in the way of shell fragments or other materials as a result of the raking of the beach at two week intervals outside of the tern nesting season. To test the hypothesis that the birds had selected the strand-line microhabitat over the more open adjacent areas, we modified our census to specifically compare nest densities of the open beach with those of the strand line.

Along a randomly-selected 100 m length, 2 m width, of the strand line we found 15 nests with eggs and one with chicks. Along a 100 m length, 2 m width, transect parallel to the strand line, but precisely through the middle of the colony (midway between the nests closest to and most distant from the seawall), we found only 2 nests with eggs. We repeated the exercise in another part of the colony and found 22 nests with eggs along the strand-line transect and 3 along the mid-line transect. In a third part of the colony where there was a relatively dense growth of sandspur (*Cenchrus*), a 100 m transect along the strand line included 19 nests, whereas a 100 m transect through mid-colony included 8 nests.

The differences are so great that statistical analyses are not needed to demonstrate their significance, although the adaptive value of selecting strand-line sites over non-strand-line sites may include one or both of two possibilities. The eggs are more camouflaged within the more heterogeneous environment of the strand line, but at the same time, the variability in the pattern of scattered debris may provide cues that allow each pair to more easily locate their own nest in this large colony. Burger and Gochfeld (1990) suggest another possibility. They found Least Terns in New Jersey and New York preferentially nested in areas with shells mixed with sand and avoided pure sand beaches and suggested that the presence of the shells lessened the potential for drifting sand. Debris in a strand line might function similarly.

Our data suggest that land managers might be able to attract terns to specific areas—and possibly away from others—by spreading bark chips or similar material (commonly sold as mulch) in a pattern and density similar to those found in a strand line. Such a linear arrangement as a strand line, however, may have a negative potential: if the terns can use it as a cue for locating their nests, a predator might learn to do so as well. Under normal conditions, Least Terns shift nesting areas as a result of natural succession, moving to more open areas as vegetation becomes dense through natural succession. The Biloxi colony, however, has been managed for several years to maintain the early successional stage of the habitat and keep the birds within the same protected area. These management efforts have the potential of allowing predators to learn nest any such placement strategy of the terns. Certainly the balance between positive and negative impacts might vary from site to site and any such management efforts should be monitored carefully.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Burger, J., and M. Gochfeld. 1990. Nest site selection in Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*) in New Jersey and New York. *Colonial Waterbirds* 13:31-40.
- Jackson, J.A., and B.J.S. Jackson. 1985. Status, dispersion, and population changes of the Least Tern in coastal Mississippi. *Colonial Waterbirds* 8:54-62.



**Figure 1.** Strand line of bark chips and other debris left by an unusually high tide and used preferentially for nesting by Least Terns within the Gulfport, Mississippi, tern colony.

## BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING DUCKS AT YAZOO NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, MISSISSIPPI

Douglas R. Wood

*Department of Wildlife and Fisheries  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, MS 39762*

Two Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) were observed at the Yazoo National Wildlife Refuge, Washington County, Mississippi from 16-23 July 1996 and photographed 17 July 1996. I first observed the Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks on 16 July at approximately 10:00 as they were flying over several ponds designated for wader and shorebird management on the west side of the refuge. I followed the birds to where they landed and observed them foraging and preening in one of the management ponds.

At approximately 19:00 on 16 July, I returned to the area with Michael Taquino, a field technician and student at Mississippi State University working on a project involving avian communities and bottomland hardwood restoration efforts. We observed the pair of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks fly between two ponds. The two ducks appeared to be closely associated, possibly indicating a long-term pair bond between the them.

On 17 July, at approximately 19:30, I returned to the management ponds and photographed the Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks as they foraged. I returned again on 23 July at approximately 19:00 with Michael Taquino and Tim Nuttle and observed the pair foraging and preening. This was the last sighting of the pair until our field season ended approximately two weeks later. I routinely stopped by these ponds to observe the birds present and I am confident the ducks were not present before mid-July or after 23 July.

The wildlife biologist for the Yazoo National Wildlife Refuge, David Linden, was notified that the birds were present. One previous record of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks occurring at the refuge exists. Three individuals observed a pair of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks at Yazoo NWR on 8-10 May 1985 (Hodges 1985). John Fulton photographed the Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, which were the first confirmed record of the species in Mississippi (Hodges 1985). The only other record

of this species is one duck observed by seven individuals near Arkabutla Lake, Tate County, from 20-25 May 1989 (Schiefer 1990).

The occurrence of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks in Mississippi is unusual due to its typical distribution in the United States, usually breeding only in southernmost Texas and rarely venturing outside their breeding range (Bellrose 1980, Richard Kaminski, personal communication). Although this species is often considered nonmigratory, several band recoveries have been made as far east as Pecan Island, Louisiana (Bolen 1967). Thus, the occurrence of this species in western Mississippi is well out of its normal range. No major weather events occurred in the week leading up to the sighting of the Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, therefore, this sighting may be an example of post-breeding dispersal.

One nesting record outside of Texas exists for this species. In 1978, a pair nested at Reelfoot Lake, Tennessee (AOU 1983). Although I do not feel that this pair of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks attempted nesting at Yazoo NWR, the possibility of this species nesting in Mississippi does exist and should not be discounted.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank J. Armacost, B. Davis, and J. Jackson for their assistance in preparing the manuscript. I also thank M. Taquino, C. Reynolds and T. Nuttle for their patience with my constant birding endeavors during the field season.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- American Ornithologist's Union. 1983. Checklist of North American birds. 6th edition. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- Bellrose, F.C. 1980. Ducks, geese, and swans of North America, third edition. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.
- Bolen, E.G. 1967. The ecology of the Black-bellied Tree Duck in southern Texas. Ph.D. dissertation, Utah State Univ., Logan, Utah.
- Hodges, M.F. Jr., 1985. Birds around the state: December 1984-November 1985. The Mississippi Kite 15:24-38.
- Schiefer, T.L. 1990. Birds around the state: December 1988-December 1989. The Mississippi Kite 20:8-30.

## A BROOD OF ALBINO EASTERN BLUEBIRDS IN MERIDIAN, MISSISSIPPI

Barry L. Jones and Lizabeth A. Jones

*1100 62nd Court  
Meridian, Mississippi 39305*

On 8 August 1996 at 1:15 p.m., we observed an Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) closely followed by three all white birds of the same size as they flew across Mississippi highway 493 in north Meridian, Lauderdale County, Mississippi. They landed on the ground and we stopped to observe them from a distance of about 20 feet. The silhouettes and general appearance other than color of the white birds matched that of the bluebird. After about a minute and a half, the adult Bluebird flew into woods behind the house and was followed by the three white birds.

We watched for these birds each time we passed through the area, but did not see one again until 19 September, when we saw a white Eastern Bluebird at the junction of Mississippi highway 493 and Old Poplar Springs Road. It landed in a vacant lot where it appeared to be eating an insect before flying away.

[Editor's note: These albino Eastern Bluebirds were also independently observed by MOS members Elna C. Ezell and Mary R. Hollis.]



## PREDATION OF A PEREGRINE ON A RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD THAT WAS MOBBING IT

Charley Delmas

5513 Dead River Rd.  
Gautier, Mississippi 39553

On 13 September 1995, Lucy Jacobson, Charlie Brenke, and I were on the east end of Horn Island, Jackson Co., Mississippi, checking on shorebird activity on a sandbar that was about ½ mile long and 300 yards wide with the Gulf of Mexico on one side and the Mississippi Sound on the other. Several nearby fresh and brackish water ponds on Horn Island also offered feeding sites for many sandpipers and wading birds as well as an open area roosting site for flocks of gulls and terns. In contrast to past visits to the area, we saw little activity other than a Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*), a few Sanderlings (*Calidris alpina*), and Black-bellied Plovers (*Pluvialis squatarola*). Then we saw the probable reason for the scarcity of birds: a Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*) patrolling the sandbar.

We moved west on the island in hopes of finding more birds, then Charlie Brenke noticed the Peregrine flying high in the very blue sky -- perhaps 1500 to 2000 feet up. When we focused on it we were able to see a smaller bird harassing the falcon. Over and over the tiny silhouette flew at the falcon which would duck and twist away but did not change its slow steady course. Then, this mysterious little bird dove toward the falcon's head. This time the Peregrine turned quickly and caught its small, feisty shadow in its bill, then smoothly passed it to its talons. The Peregrine then flew with its prey toward the east tip of the island, landing out of sight behind some sea oats about 1/4 mile away.

We decided to approach cautiously and see if we could identify the Peregrine's victim. As soon as the falcon saw us, however, it grabbed its prey and flew over open water to another section of the island. We continued toward the site where the Peregrine had been in hopes of finding some feathers that might identify its prey. Next to the log on which the Peregrine had been perched was the fresh head of a female Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*).

We eventually moved to 3 or 4 different spots on Horn Island that day and ended up seeing at least 6 Peregrines and possibly as many as 8, though two might have been birds seen earlier.

Why was the Red-winged Blackbird mobbing the Peregrine? Perhaps it was the only thing it could do if she was separated from a flock and caught in the wide open sky. There was little else the Red-wing could do. If she tried to flee, the much faster Peregrine would quickly overtake her. So she took the offensive, keeping very close above the Peregrine. Keeping pace with the Peregrine, she flew, like a child reaching the limits on a swing, making half-moon arcs at the larger bird, lunging down and coasting up, almost hovering at the top, only to repeat over and over again. In the end, however, the Peregrine had its meal.

## MOURNING DOVE NESTING PERSISTENCE

Jerome A. Jackson

*Department of Biological Sciences  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, Mississippi 39762*

On 22 March 1994, I received a call from Conner Maynard reporting an unusual Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) nest at a site in Starkville, Oktibbeha County, Mississippi, where a new apartment building was under construction. I went to the site and discovered that what was unusual about the nest was that it was within about one foot of the building that was under construction and the birds were tolerating all of the activity. The birds had built their nest in a loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) on a horizontal branch about 15 feet above the ground. Construction activity apparently had already begun when the birds chose the site for their nest, although during incubation construction activities were primarily at or near ground level.

As the first floor walls of the building went up, they reached to within about 3 feet of the nest, yet through the construction the birds continued to incubate and later brood and feed their two young. Since the nest branch extended towards the building under construction, when the second floor was added, the workmen had to saw the limb off within about 6 inches of the nest (Figure 1). Throughout the construction an adult often remained on the nest, even allowing workmen to pet it. On 25 March as the exterior of the building was nearing completion, the chicks fledged.

Mourning Doves are known for nesting near humans, occasionally nesting on structures such as window ledges, rain gutters, and abandoned vehicles (Sayre and Silvy 1993). They are also rather tolerant of human activity near the nest (Willoughby and Krebs 1986, Mirarchi and Baskett 1994), but not usually so tolerant as the birds at this site.



Figure 1. Morning Dove nest with two young, inches from the framed up window of an apartment building under construction. Note how the limb had to be sawed off just distal to the nest. Despite the construction activities and sawed off nest limb, the birds were successful in fledging these young.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Mirarchi, R.E., and T.S. Baskett. 1994. Mourning Dove. *In* A. Poole and F. Gill, eds., *The Birds of North America*, No. 117. The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- Sayre, M.W., and N.J. Silvy. 1993. Nesting and production. Pp. 81-104, *in* T.S. Baskett, M.W. Sayre, R.E. Tomlinson, and R.E. Mirarchi, eds., *Ecology and Management of the Mourning Dove*. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.
- Willoughby, E.J., and C.T. Krebs. 1986. Adaptability of parental behavior in the Mourning Dove. *Journal of Field Ornithology* 57:238-239.

THE MISSISSIPPI KITE

Mississippi Ornithological Society  
Organized 30 April 1955

Officers

|                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| President                    | Allan J. Mueller<br>4308 Shenandoah Road<br>Vicksburg, MS 39180  |
| Vice President               | Marion Hutto Schiefer<br>1394 P.D. Fulgham Road<br>Starkville, MS 39759  |
| Secretary                    | Carolyn Jarnigan<br>Rt. 3, Box 217<br>Corinth, MS 38834  |
| Treasurer                    | Janet Dubuisson<br>22410 Glad Acres<br>Pass Christian, MS 39571  |
| Editor: The Mississippi Kite | Jerome A. Jackson<br>Dept. of Biological Sciences<br>Mississippi State University<br>Mississippi State, MS 39762 |
| Editor: MOS Newsletter       | W. Marvin Davis<br>308 Lewis Lane<br>Oxford, MS 38655  |

MOS Memberships

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| Honorary                                      | No dues      |
| Life  | \$100        |
| Sustaining                                    | 20 (or more) |
| Active  | 10           |
| Family  | 15           |
| Library Subscriptions                         | 10           |
| Junior (under 17) and<br>Golden Age (over 65) | 4            |
| Junior/Golden Age Family                      | 8            |

Membership and subscription dues should be sent to the Treasurer. The Mississippi Kite is currently published twice a year and is sent to all classes of membership.