

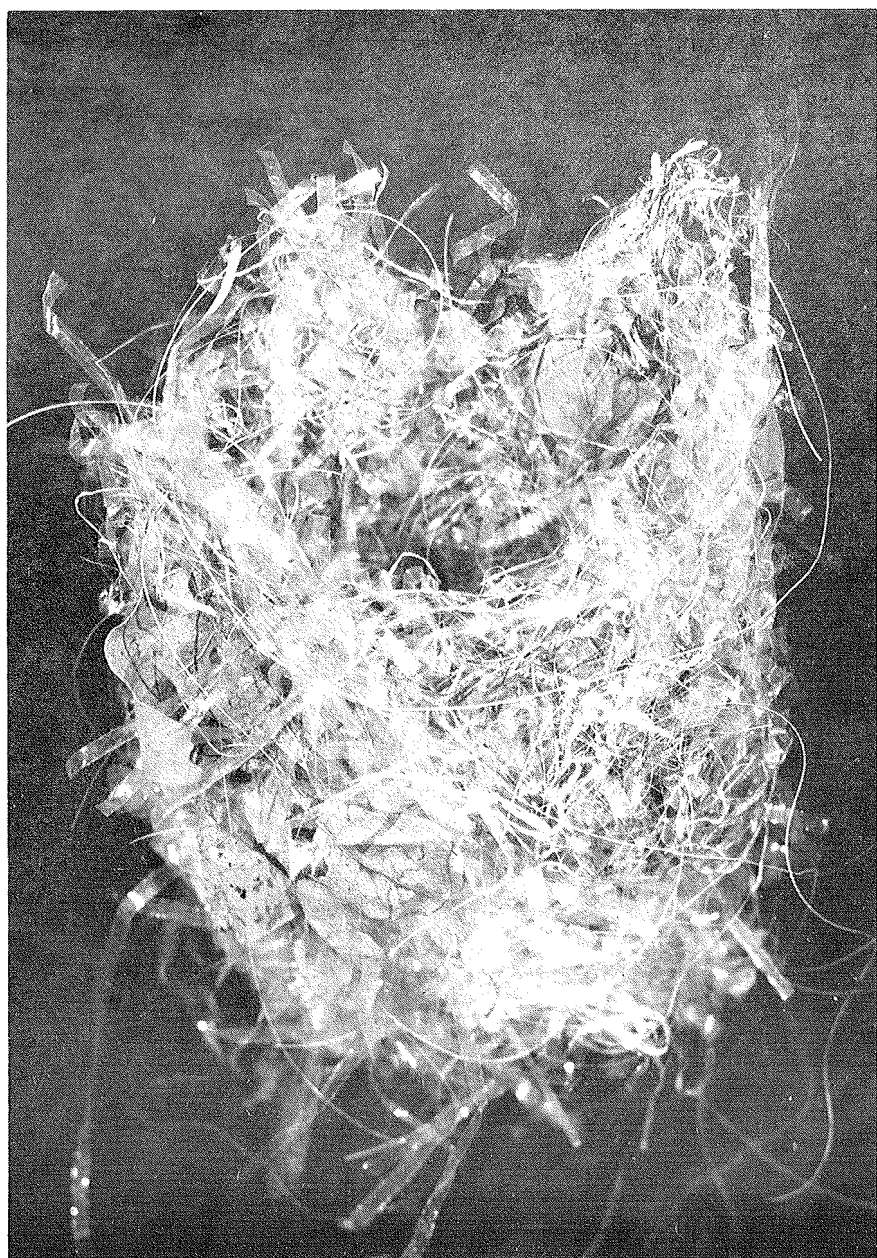
THE MISSISSIPPI KITE

No. 6

January 1975

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Frontispiece: A nylon and cellophane Baltimore (Northern) Oriole's Nest.

Front Cover: A pair of Mississippi Kites.

Western Sandpiper in North Mississippi

By James N. Sappington
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On 17 May 1973, while conducting a breeding bird survey, I collected a Western Sandpiper (Ereunetes mauri) on the Mississippi State University South Farm in Oktibbeha County approximately 3 miles southwest of the main campus. The bird, which evidently was migrating to its breeding grounds, was fluttering as it jumped and ran ahead of me along a gravel road and was hit by my automobile. Two hours of close scrutiny of the surrounding area that day, plus 12 other visits during the next 12 days, did not reveal additional birds of the same or similar species. The bird is presently in the ornithological collection at Mississippi State University catalogued as skin number 715.

The specimen, a female with a well-developed ovary, had very little fat and weighed only 19.0 grams which is between 3 and 4 grams below the lower limit of the expected range of 4/5 to 1 1/2 ounces (Stout, 1967). The stomach was practically empty, containing five small rocks and a mere trace of an almost-completely digested substance that was not readily identifiable. Certain statistics are: wing length, 93 mm; bill length, 18.8 mm. Overall length could not be obtained because all tail feathers, including coverts, were missing. The bird was in summer plumage, with rusty back and crown produced by feathers with very dark centers with somewhat lighter margins. Underparts were white to very light buff with small triangular markings on the breast. This plumage endures from about April to July or even September (Stout, 1967).

The range of this species in North America, Central America, West Indies, Northern South America, and extreme Northeastern Asia (Bent, 1962), but it breeds only along the coasts of Northern and Western Alaska and Northeastern Siberia (Stout, 1967). It migrates mainly along the Pacific Coast with a few into

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the interior and some all the way to about Massachusetts southward. Stout, 1967 reports that the spring migration lasts from early April into June, and the fall migration begins in early July and continues into late November. The spring movement of those birds which wintered in the southeastern states is imperfectly known because of the scarcity of records (Bent, 1962).

Gandy and Turcotte, 1970 report a sight record in Mississippi for March 31, 1962 in Jackson County, and the latest collected specimen was a female taken in Hancock County near Bay St. Louis on May 8, 1940. However, literature surveyed indicates that the Western Sandpiper is very common on the coasts of southern states where it spends the winter. I do not know of any inland records for Mississippi.

The Western Sandpiper is the western counterpart of the abundant Semipalmated (Ereunetes pusillus) (Stout, 1967) with which it is generally found in the migratory grounds (Bent, 1962). Perhaps this species is in greater abundance, especially in the coastal region of our state, than reports lead us to believe. Even experts agree that it is very hard to identify.

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It should not be confused with the Least Sandpiper (Erolia minutilla) since the Western Sandpiper has blackish legs, but those of the Least are yellowish. Also, it is somewhat larger than the Least. When in its rusty summer plumage, it is fairly easily distinguished from the Semipalmated Sandpiper, but its winter plumage presents a problem. Some field marks which show how the Western differs from the Semipalmated are somewhat larger size, longer, heavier bill with a slight drop at the tip and often carrying it pointing more downward and a more squeaky highly-pitched call (Robbins, Bruun and Zim, 1966).

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Further Information on Mass Movements of Blue Jays on the Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana Coasts in October 1972

By Gordon Gunter
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In October 1972 considerable interest along parts of the central Gulf (Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana) was engendered by large flocks of blue jays flying along the coast, falling emaciated into the water and some ending up on oilwell platforms off the Louisiana coast. Newspaper stories were published in The Mobile Press and The Daily Herald (Biloxi-Gulf - port) and accounts were published in the Mississippi Ornithological Society Newsletter (Gunter 1972) and in The Mississippi Kite (McGraw et al. 1973). Since that time other ideas and information have come to light.

Stevenson () gathered data on summaries of field counts of blue jays in the Southeast during a series of years extending from 1938 to 1972 but not necessarily concurrent years, in seven localities in Alabama, Mississippi and Florida. These counts cover the southern blue jay and the northern subspecies as

well. He refers to the A.O.U. Check list (1957) as saying that the northern blue jay migrates into Louisiana, southern Alabama and northeastern Georgia in the winter. Stevenson's data definitely show an increase on blue jays in various parts of the Florida and Alabama, including Gulf Coast areas, in September and October. This increase could be due to the northern blue jays coming in or local populations being pushed southward by the northern migration. In any case, at various Alabama, Mississippi and Florida locations their blue jay abundance was increased by eighty-five per cent in September and October compared to the previous six months, during the years Stevenson considered.

Dr. M. L. Wass (in litt.) of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, called my attention to the fact that blue jays have increased enormously and may have developed some sort of lemming reaction in flying out to sea. Be that as it may, the large numbers of blue jays on the Gulf coast of Mississippi has impressed me considerably in recent years, while some other birds seem to have declined in numbers.

Dr. Wass also called my attention to a communication by Toenes in American Birds (1973), which presents an alternate idea as to why so many blue jays fell exhausted into the water. She wrote the editor that there has been an influx of jays, thrashers, and flickers on October 3 at Dauphin Island, Alabama, and that on the 6th a weak, cold front came in and the next morning blue jays were literally everywhere, flying out over the Gulf where the flight became an erratic, senseless milling. Stevenson (op. cit.) also mentioned the milling about of large flocks of blue jays when they come to large bodies of water, which they are reluctant to cross.

Toenes went on to say that this enormous concentration of blue jays lasted from October 7 to 9 when sick and dead birds began to appear. Two of these birds were sent to the pesticide laboratory of the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industry at Auburn. The analyses showed a total of 118 parts per million of heptachlor epoxide, DDE and DDT. Ms. Toenes said that soybean fields just to the north

were being sprayed from a plane and a road in one area was covered with doves, nighthawks and song birds. She also said a quail from this area was found to be 131 parts per million of various pesticides.

This flight along the shores and over the Gulf is the same episode reported by Gunter (1972) and McGraw et al. (1973) as having occurred from October 10 to 16 a little farther west.

These combined observations show that large flocks of blue jays from the northward arrived on the coastal areas of Alabama and Mississippi in early October 1972, possibly in much greater numbers than usual, but nevertheless following a known pattern of influx of migrants in September and October. A great many of them flew out to sea where they milled about. Others flew on a hundred miles or so to the southwest where they were reported on oilwell platforms and boats around the mouth of the Mississippi in the State of Louisiana. Some turned and flew back to land, appearing to come across the water from the southeast. Apparently the birds seen on the western Alabama (Pettit Bois Island) and Mississippi coasts coming from the southeast had gone out over the Gulf at or near Dauphin Island, Alabama. Thousands of them fell into Mississippi Sound and the open sea.

Some of these birds at least were affected by large amounts of pesticides they contained. They may also have been affected by some sort of lemming reaction brought on by crowding at the edge of the land next to the sea. These observations seem to invalidate the hypothesis that these birds came from a low food area in Florida and flew northwestward across the Gulf of Mexico.

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The Yellow-headed Blackbird in Mississippi

By Jerome A. Jackson
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On 26 March 1973 I collected an immature male Yellow-headed Blackbird (Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus) on the south farm of Mississippi State University in Oktobbeha County. The bird was prepared as a study skin and is catalogued as M.S.U. skin number 699. It was moderately fat, had an incompletely ossified skull, and weighed 86.0 grams. This is the first specimen record of the Yellow-headed Blackbird for Mississippi, although the species was observed in 1965 at Moss Point in Jackson County. In a letter to Mr. B. E. Gandy dated 8 Sept. 1965, Alice Tait reported an immature male Yellow-headed Blackbird had visited a feeding station on the ground in her back yard on 9, 10, 24, 25, and 26 April 1965. Apparently the same bird was seen daily from 11 to 23 April at another feeder about a quarter of a mile away.

The Yellow-headed Blackbird is characteristically a bird of the Great Plains and parts of the western

U.S. It normally winters in Mexico and parts of the southwestern U.S. Lowery (1960) reports that: "The Yellow-headed Blackbird is a very rare winter visitor and a rare spring transient for which there are still less than a dozen definite records in Louisiana." Nevertheless, Bent (1958) cites records of this species from several eastern states, including many along the Atlantic coast.

Strong west winds for over a week preceding the vagrant appearance of the bird in Oktibbeha County probably were an important influence on its coming here. Williamson (1955) has referred to the wind as being "the migrant bird's greatest enemy". The fact that the two Mississippi records of this species and the Red Crossbill (Loxia curvirostra) (Jackson, 1973) were of first year birds is probably not coincidental. Immature birds of many species are known to wander more than adults, a fact that may be due to the greater familiarity the adults have with migration routes and wintering grounds.

Mississippians should be on the lookout for the Yellow-headed Blackbird during spring and fall migration. These birds are likely to be seen mixed in with other blackbird species foraging in open pastures and fields of lespedeza or grain. The adult males are easy to spot with their bright yellow head and white wing patches, but the females and immature birds are less conspicuous, having only a yellow bib and lacking the white in the wings.

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An Unusual Nest of a Baltimore Oriole

By Jerome A. Jackson
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In November of 1973 Mrs. E. R. Rainey of Lexington, Mississippi sent me an unusual nest of a Baltimore Oriole (Icterus galbula) that she found at the tip of a branch of a post oak in her pasture. The nest (Frontispiece) is composed primarily of transparent cellophane strips similar to the "grass" used to fill children's Easter baskets. A few real grasses and pieces of leaves are included. In addition to the woven cellophane forming the outside, the nest is lined and was attached to a limb with nylon fishing line of at least two different sizes - apparently 15 and 30 pound test line. The nest measures approximately 15 cm long by 11 cm diameter on the outside. These dimensions are similar to those mentioned in Bent (1958) Life Histories of North American Blackbirds, Orioles, Tanagers, and Allies. Smithsonian Institution U.S. National Museum Bulletin 211.), though he mentions that M. G. Vaiden found a Baltimore Oriole nest in Mississippi that was over 20 cm deep.

The nest is now in the ornithological collections of the Zoology Department at Mississippi State University.

A Review and Commentary

By Gordon Gunter
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on

The Bird Life of Texas by Harry C. Oberholser. Paintings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Edited, with distribution maps and additional material, by Edward B. Kincaid, Jr. With the assistance of Suzanne Winckler and John Rowlett. Vol. 1, xxviii + 530 pp. Vol. 2, vii + 531-1039 pp. University of Texas Press. Austin and London. 1974. Boxed \$60.00

The writer approaches this subject as a general zoologist and not a well-honed ornithologist by inclination or training. As my friend Joel W. Hedgpeth says, "There are too many small brown birds". But I have seen the big hawks try to knock the eagles out of the sky and have seen 250,000 geese mount the air at one time, and a few other things that keep me hanging around the periphery of ornithology.

Also I have watched a good many bird watchers in my time. So when we are gathered around the sequestered campfires in Valhalla I expect to wander around the edge of the ornithological circle to see if the late James Fisher lost the pique which showed at Port Aransas when I told him how to tell the difference between Royal and Caspian terns flying by at a great distance, or to see if that gentle teacher Roger Tory Peterson has something new in valkyrie identification in flight or if Ludlow Griscom knows them all precisely by only flirts of their adornment. And there would be dear Connie Hagar with whom I would surely plot a little treason on how to get back to Texas.

Additionally, I knew Oberholser back in the early thirties when he was working on his "Birds of Louisiana". He was the thin ascetic type and I do not remember ever seeing him smile. But I remember him kindly, although I cannot recollect a single thing we ever said.

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Lastly, I believe strongly in publication of scientific data for it is the primary way we get ahead. Walter P. Taylor taught me years ago to abhor "those blizzards and blizzards of data" that come to naught. For that reason I suffered for years, along with many others, over the "Oberholser book". I remember discussing it with Howard Dodgen, then Executive Secretary of the Texas Game and Fish Commission. However, that Commission wisely chose instead to publish Peterson's handbook on Texas birds, which is much better suited to its clientele. Then I discussed it with the late John H. Baker of the National Audubon Society. But he said somewhat in expostulation, "Do you know how long it is"? Then he went on to say, "The Old Man wants it just so". And so at long last, some of us are grateful, thankful and deeply rejoicing that the Oberholser book on Texas birds has come out at last, even though it is several years after the death of its author who lived a very long life even so.

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So what do we have? It takes a little explaining. This book began when Vernon Bailey, the mammalogist, Oberholser and Fuertes, the artist, were sent by the Biological Survey to Texas to study the bird and mammal fauna of that region. They began in the Big Bend in 1901. Bailey's work came out in 1905, but for various reasons Oberholser's account of the birds was delayed and, as is stated in the preface, this delay was prophetic.

The manuscript grew to three million words and it touched upon everything that related to Texas birds, to which about two-thirds of all North American species north of Mexico belong. Nevertheless, no one can say the published version is verbose. Oberholser refused to publish anything separately and said it all belonged in the work on Texas birds. He retired in 1941, but kept doggedly on. Finally, through a series of fortunate happenings and events, The University of Texas Press became interested in the project and found a donor who helped finance it. Thus, my alma mater and the Press, with which I used to work on other matters, finally brought this astounding work to completion. In all that I take a vicarious pride.

The original manuscript was only a little short of 12,000 type-script pages. The 3,000,000 words had to be shortened to 1,000,000 and finally Doctor Oberholser reluctantly agreed because he saw no other way that publication would come. Even so, those who love completeness will be gratified to know that full microfilm copies of the manuscript are on file at the Smithsonian and in the Archives of The University of Texas. These along with the book will certainly be consulted by the careful hard-core professional for some few hundred years to come.

The editor and his assistants did a magnificent job, the grinding labor of which no one but they will ever fully comprehend. The editor got out and worked through the out-of-the-way counties that were less traveled in the first half of the century. The nearly 1,000 page introduction was cut to two chapters, History of Texas Ornithology and Ecology of Texas Birds. The ecology chapter, even with strong influence of the editor is not really modern and the reader must hold in mind the zeitgeist of the time when Oberholser made his observations and formulated his ideas. It discusses climate, physiography, vegetation, regional bird life and changes in bird life. The latter is most authoritative for Oberholser was there. As a factual reporter he does not let his feelings shine through often but under his account of the Mallard he speaks of "this terrible twentieth century" and discusses some of the factors that allow some ducks to come through to the twenty-first century. He also quotes with approval Delacour's expression "man-infested world", and wishes that the Golden Eagles really ate as many young of the destructive sheep and goats as their owners claim.

The species account gives the English name, usually the A.O.U. name, then comes the technical name, usually not the A.O.U. name. Doctor Oberholser was a distinguished taxonomist and he had his reasons, which are explained in an appendix. These are matters of deep and specialized scholarship, including Latin and Greek grammar, the Code and the voluminous literature of ornithology. Some of these discussions may even convince the American Ornithological Union. This is a factual account about birds and things that

add nothing are left out. Even in grammatical endings of species names the Doctor sometimes does not conform. Personally, I admire his stance for I know too well the sheep-syndrome of the average zoologist in name following, as well as the ignorant arrogance with which some people wend their way with errors through the International Code, as well as the blatant dishonesty of a few.

Then follows the detailed account. Oberholser examined thousands of birds and gives measurements and plumage descriptions. His place records were enormous and a great deal of the shortening of this book was by substitution of county maps for all species recorded ten times or more.

The species accounts are not long even so, and food habits are not emphasized for some species. Little else is left out and the color descriptions are generally greatly superior to old museum specimens. Oberholser seems to have examined nearly all preserved Texas specimens in all American collections, and he saw hundreds fresh. The selected bibliography is a real bibliography in the old sense of the word, for very few papers are actually cited in the text. But it is quite complete as I realized when I saw five of my contributions to ornithology cited and all of my contributions are minor.

Five hundred and forty-five species are thus described by one of the most careful and dedicated ornithologists the world has ever known. These descriptions fit many birds found widely distributed over the world. All real bird scholars will have to consult this book and it should be in all major libraries. It will be difficult to use for the average birder in the field for the two volumes weigh ten pounds. All ornithological clubs should have it, even those on the Atlantic Coast, for most of their birds are there.

The University of Texas Press spared nothing in the bookmaking art that I can see, and these volumes will last several hundred years. The photographs are expertly done and most of the Fuertes drawings have never been published before. Seventeen of these are in color.

Dr. Harry C. Oberholser was no hail-fellow-well-met. He meant business and his business was birds. His other various works placed him among the great American ornithologists. The Bird Life of Texas places him among the great ornithologists of the world.

Successful Eagle Nesting on Mississippi Coast

By W. H. Turcotte

As reported in the MOS Newsletter, Vol. 19, No. 4, page 11, in January 1974 a pair of Bald Eagles was observed nest-building in a tall pine tree in Harrison County on the Big Biloxi River. The nesting attempt was observed by Mr. Oliver C. Huch, a State Highway Department Engineer and by others throughout the cycle until the birds abandoned the completed nest about mid-April. No evidence of eggs or young could be observed during this time.

The 1974 nest was situated in a living slash pine tree well out into a marsh area bordering the east bank of the Big Biloxi River. It was reoccupied and on February 21, 1975 Mr. Huch and Mr. Flynn Clark observed one large young eagle in the nest with both adults sitting side by side on a limb. The immature was capable of climbing or leaping to the side of the nest.

On February 26, 1975 at about 1:00 P.M. I had the opportunity to observe the adults, nest and young in the nest. A 15-60 power zoomscope was used from the new Interstate 10 right-of-way. One adult eagle was seen on the side of the nest that appeared to be regurgitating or feeding on something or feeding young in the nest. No evidence of a young bird could be seen in the nest. The second adult, which had been perched on a dead tree in the marsh, flew to the edge of the nest beside the other adult. Soon afterward the bird seen feeding flew. A wing of a bird in the nest was then seen to move upward, then the head and neck of a young eagle was seen. The immature nestling then jumped and flew to the edge of the nest and across the nest beside the remaining adult. The nest-

ling appeared to have completely feathered primaries and soon should be able to leave the nest.

Mr. Bobby Tramel, State Supervisor, Wildlife Services, Fish and Wildlife Service, observed the eagles earlier over a six hour period with about the same results. It can be definitely concluded that the 1975 nesting produced a fledgling eagle ready to leave the nest. This is the first known successful nesting record for Bald Eagles in Mississippi since the early 1950's.

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