

**GRAY CATBIRDS NESTING IN ALACHUA COUNTY, FLORIDA**DAVID L. LEONARD, JR.<sup>1</sup> AND HOLLY B. FREIFELD<sup>2</sup>

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The breeding distribution of the Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*) in Florida has been reviewed by Stevenson and Menk (1978), Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) and Stevenson and Anderson (1994). Confirmed breeding records exist for the panhandle, however peninsular records are very scarce (e.g., Powell 1978). The following summer records exist for Alachua County: one singing in nw Gainesville from 17 July-2 August 1988, one singing at Alachua on 27 June 1994, and one or two observed (if two, never seen together) east of Alachua 27 May-19 July 1996 (R. Rowan, pers. comm.). No evidence of breeding was associated with these observations. The sole breeding record for the species in Alachua County consists of a female observed on a nest without eggs in August 1987 (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Since the winter/spring of 2000 an assumed pair of Gray Catbirds was observed almost daily in the authors' backyard in nw Gainesville. This area of Gainesville is heavily vegetated with a mix of non-native landscape shrubs (e.g., azaleas [*Rhododendron* sp.]), and native trees (e.g., Carolina cherry laurel [*Prunus caroliniana*], hackberry [*Celtis pallida*], and oaks [*Quercus* sp.]). Despite the presence of a singing male, we noted no evidence of breeding in 2000. The pair was observed through the fall and winter and beginning in April 2001 the male was heard singing daily. On 25 April 2001 we observed a catbird carrying nesting material and we found a nest on 12 May. The nest contained three eggs and the female was incubating them; on the following day the nest contained a fourth egg (females usually begin incubating after the second egg is laid; Cimprich and Moore 1995). The bulky stick nest was similar to that of other members of the family Mimidae, and was placed 2 m from the ground in a Camellia (*Camellia* sp.) shrub. The eggs were a uniform turquoise green (Fig. 1). One egg hatched on 25 May 2001, and two additional nestlings were observed on 27 May. We assumed these two hatched on 26 May. The incubation period (from last egg laid to last hatched) was 13 days. Cimprich and Moore (1995) reported a mean incubation period of 12.9 days from last egg laid to last hatched. On 3 June, the nestlings were covered with pin feathers and appeared well fed. The nest was depredated during the night of 3 June or the morning of 4 June and only the unhatched egg remained in the nest. The nest was damaged, and although raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) and black rats (*Rattus rattus*) are frequently observed in the neighborhood, identification of the predator would be speculative (see Larivière 1999).

On 10 June, we observed a catbird displaying (i.e., head-down fluffed display [Cimprich and Moore 1995]), and on 16 June we observed three adult birds. On 26 June we observed a catbird carrying food into a heavily wooded lot approximately 100 m from the first nest. On 10 July, we discovered a second nest in the wooded lot. Exotic azaleas and camellia shrubs dominated this area. The second nest was 2.3 m from the ground in a camellia bush. When discovered, a bird was sitting on the nest; we did not flush the bird



**Figure 1. Gray Catbird nest in Alachua County, Florida. Photo by David Leonard.**

to check for eggs. On 12 July the female was incubating and the nest contained three eggs. The female was still incubating three eggs on 21 July. On 23 July, the nest contained two nestlings and one egg. We checked the nest the following day and the third egg remained unhatched. On 31 July, a single fledgling was observed. Assuming the eggs hatched on 22 July, the 9-day fledgling period falls within the range (8 - 12 days) reported in Cimprich and Moore (1995). We never observed fledglings after 31 July and a catbird continued singing through August.

Given that these birds were not banded and we observed more than two catbirds in the area, the two nests may have been the work of different pairs. Given the rarity of nesting records for Alachua County, however, the second nest was likely a second breeding attempt by the pair whose nest failed on 3 June. Approximately 5 m from the second active nest, we also found an abandoned nest (in the same species of camellia shrub), which appeared to be a catbird nest; this suggests that Gray Catbirds have bred in this area in previous years.

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