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FURTHER EVALUATION OF SOME ORNITHOLOGICAL CONUNDRUMS IN FLORIDA

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A conundrum is a problem admitting of no satisfactory solution. Some ornithological reports from the interior of peninsular Florida during the early-to-mid 20th century have heretofore fit this definition. As an example, neither Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) nor Stevenson and Anderson (1994) have completely resolved reports of peripheral breeding of the Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*) in the interior of central Florida. They did not accredit these reports, but neither did they fully discredit them, i.e., their evaluation was to hold them in negative abeyance. The purpose of this note is to document information extracted from the field notes and journals of D. J. Nicholson (hereafter, DJN) that contributes to the further resolution of the above and two other ornithological conundrums in Florida.

White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*).—Stevenson and Anderson (1994) questioned the positive identification for the ownership of the empty nest that Nicholson discovered in 1910 when he was 17 years old because no description of any adults was available, although McMillian and Pranty (1997) did not question the veracity of this discovery. This nest was the third historical nest of the White-tailed Kite in Florida (Stevenson and Anderson 1994; also see Pranty and McMillian 1997 and McMillian and Pranty 1997).

DJN found a pair of kites at this nest (one bird on, one bird off) that he initially identified as Mississippi Kites *(Ictinia mississippiensis*). He re-identified them as White-tailed Kites after he shot one of them. He prepared this bird as a skin, but regrettably, did not determine the sex.

DJN attempted to shoot its mate, after it returned to the nest, calling, but he was no longer able to approach the bird closely enough to do so. The nest site, on a cattle ranch on the Kissimmee Prairie, was 2.4 km from the southeast shore of Lake Kissimmee, between there and Lake Jackson. DJN was probably reluctant to reveal that he shot one of the birds while it was building the nest, which is why the nest remained unused. This specimen was destroyed (burned) in 1915 (see McNair 2001).

Misidentification of the Mississippi Kite for the White-tailed Kite (the reverse of what happened above) also occurred in south Florida during the late 19th century, although the original observer who shot the bird misidentified it even after the bird was in the hand (Cahoon 1890, Castle 1891, Chapman 1891; see Howell 1932). Neither Kale (1974) nor Pranty and McMillian (1997) mentioned if misidentification of the two species could have influenced their assessment of the historical status of White-tailed Kites in Florida. Mississippi Kites are scarcer than White-tailed Kites in central and south Florida (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994) and many early occurrences of White-tailed Kites are specimens, so misidentification of the two species is unlikely to have influenced assessment of the historical status of White-tailed Kites. Nonetheless, some sight observations may be suspect (e.g., report of one in 1941 at Hillsborough River State Park by O. E. Baynard; McNair, unpubl.).

Hudsonian Godwit (*Limosa haemastica*).—Stevenson and Anderson (1994) regarded the putative record of four Hudsonian Godwits shot in Tampa Bay sometime from "1924-1928" (Nicholson 1949) to constitute the first acceptable occurrence in Florida, although the two specimens that were prepared could not be located. Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) listed the specimen collected in Miami-Dade County in October 1957 as a verifiable record, which also is the first record of the species in Florida.

The report of two specimens collected sometime from "1924-1928" actually refers to birds (one male, one female) collected on 20 October 1938 (DJN, journals; *contra* Nicholson 1949) at Gadsden Point, Tampa Bay. G. R. Rossignol, Jr. shot them out of a large flock (*contra* Nicholson 1949), prepared the skins, and then gave them to one of two non-ornithological friends. DJN attempted to procure them from these individuals, but was not successful.

Rossignol did not recognize the rarity of Hudsonian Godwits in Florida. Furthermore, he stated that while he was stationed at what is now MacDill Air Force Base from 1938 to 1942 he saw godwits almost daily during autumn and winter at Gadsden Point, often in sizable flocks (50-75 birds). While Rossignol also stated the godwits he shot and skinned had reddish breasts, the location (along the Gulf coast in

autumn; see Stevenson and Anderson 1994), season (including winter), frequency, and large number of birds that he also reported as Hudsonian Godwits cannot be reconciled with Hudsonian Godwits which are scarce vernal and autumnal transients in Florida (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994) but with the occurrence of Marbled Godwits (*L. fedoa*) which are locally distributed but especially numerous in Tampa Bay (Sprandel et al. 1997). Furthermore, the sole stated identification character that Rossignol used to identify these birds as Hudsonian Godwits, their reddish breasts, is insufficient and would be questionable anyway during mid-autumn. Many Hudsonian Godwits would have commenced their pre-basic molt and begun to change from a "brown" to a "gray" color, yet Marbled Godwits retain their reddish (= cinnamon) breasts through autumn and winter.

Consequently, the first authentic verified record for the Hudsonian Godwit in Florida is in 1957 (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). Nicholson (1949) and Stevenson and Anderson (1994) thought the sight observation in 1947 constituted the first reported occurrence of Hudsonian Godwits in Florida, although a substantial proportion (ca. 25%) of subsequent sight observations were rejected by Stevenson and Anderson (1994) and few specimens have been collected.

Eastern Wood-Pewee.—Egg sets were collected by J. C. Howell, Jr. and DJN from nests high (16.8-21.4 m) in pines in fairly mature pine flatwoods (not in low, scrubby pines or a dense pine sapling thicket; *contra* Nicholson 1934, 1938) in 1933 and 2 June 1937 just north of Samsula, Volusia County (Nicholson 1934, 1938; Stevenson and Anderson 1994; DJN, journals). Nicholson (1934) referred to the Volusia County site as "short-leaved pines." The "short-leaved" pines were probably slash pines (*Pinus elliottii*), which have short leaves (= needles) only in comparison to longleaf pines (*P. palustris*). Eastern Wood-Pewees were first discovered there in 1932 when Howell (field notebook copied by DJN) also found a nest with two fresh eggs (apparently not collected) on 18 May 1932. In addition, Wray H. Nicholson found an Eastern Wood-Pewee nest with three young in 1935 (field notebook copied by DJN) and was with Howell and his brother when they collected their two egg sets. By 1953, wood-pewees had been absent for a "number of years" from this site, which contained among other species in 1937 Bachman's Sparrows (*Aimophila aestivalis*) and White-breasted Nuthatches (*Sitta carolinensis*). Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) stated that pewees were suspected of breeding in the peninsula even farther south than Volusia (and Marion) County, but that these reports were apparently indeterminate.

Some details for the indeterminate reports of the Nicholson brothers and J. C. Howell, Jr. in Seminole, Orange, and Osceola counties are cited in Nicholson (1934, 1938) but further clarification is available

from his journals. From all sources the exact localities (from north to south) and precise breeding information inasmuch as I can determine are the following:

(1) One male sang on 26 June 1930, 5 km south of Lake Mary (and 3.2 km northeast of Longwood), Seminole County. The bird was not detected later. Habitat was "short-leaved pines and oaks" near a swamp that drained into Lake Jessup.

(2) One male sang during May or June 1930, east of Fort Christmas, Orange County. The habitat was not specified except that the bird was in pines near a swamp. In April 1953 a singing male was again present near Fort Christmas.

(3) One unpaired male sang from 23 May to 20 June 1933, 3.2-4.8 km south of Illahaw, Osceola County. Habitat was a very open bald-cypress swamp.

In addition, Nicholson (1938) stated that pewees were apt to be more numerous in southeast Seminole County, and also were present from Fort Christmas as far south as 24 km below Holopaw, Osceola County in pines near swamps. He gave no further details nor can I find any additional information from his journals.

Wray H. Nicholson discovered a breeding pair of Eastern Wood-Pewees on or about 1 June 1946 near Mud Lake, Orange County, about 5.7 km southwest of Orlando. A bird was on the nest, which was located 15.25 m above the ground, near the end of a long limb of a live longleaf pine. The contents were not examined because the nest was impossible to reach. The discovery of this nest occurred nine years after the latest confirmation of breeding in Volusia County. At or near the same locality (Orange County) in pine woods, Wray also found one singing male from 1-4 May 1933 but the bird was not present thereafter. This area just southwest of Orlando was one of Wray and D. J. Nicholson's and J. C. Howell Jr.'s favorite collecting grounds for egg sets of other species that nested in longleaf pine forests (McNair, unpubl.), including Red-cockaded Woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) and White-breasted Nuthatch (the last one in central Florida was a male collected in these pine [and cypress] woods by Wray Nicholson on 16 November 1944 [Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology 24262]).

The incubating or brooding adult on a nest in Orange County is a modest extension of the known breeding range of the Eastern Wood-Pewee in the interior of central Florida. This report and the records in Volusia County occurred in mesic longleaf or slash pine flatwoods. Longleaf (and slash pine) is generally considered primary habitat in the Southeast coastal plain (cf., Georgia, Engstrom 1981; South Carolina, Forsythe 1982). Habitat descriptions for the indeterminate reports lack details, but one occurrence was in "short-leaved (= slash) pines" and at least one bird occurred in secondary breeding habitat

(cypress swamp). There is occasional confirmation of breeding in preferred habitat (open pine flatwoods, often with scattered oaks and near the margin of other habitats such as swamps and pine savannas; DJN, journals; also Bent 1942, Wilson et al. 1995, McCarty 1996, McNair, unpubl.) at two sites where wood-pewees no longer breed. The preponderance of indeterminate reports of birds (usually unpaired males) seem to be from less suitable habitat and are without documentation of breeding, and a clustering of most occurrences in the early-to-mid 1930s (see Stevenson and Anderson [1994] for more recent reports of pewees other than by the Nicholson group). The evidence is thus consistent with the erratic, peripheral occurrence of Eastern Wood-Pewees in the interior of the central peninsula of Florida during the breeding season. These occurrences may have become even more infrequent because of removal of most longleaf pine forests from this region, but DJN remarked upon the rarity of wood-pewees even in his day despite repeated sampling in areas that included the two primary localities (especially just southwest of Orlando). The status of the indeterminate reports now is much less of a conundrum because of documentation of the nest in Orange County and additional information provided herein.

For the three above species, Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) made the correct decisions based on information available to them. Stevenson and Anderson (1994) queried the integrity of the breeding record of White-tailed Kite despite some evidence available to them and falsely accepted Nicholson's (1949) account of the first record of Hudsonian Godwits in Florida. Neither Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) nor Stevenson and Anderson (1994) knew about the report (provided herein) of breeding by the Eastern Wood-Pewee in Orange County. Although I have no verifiable material as documentation for these three species (cf., McNair and Post 1999), other than two egg sets of the Eastern Wood-Pewee from Volusia County that were previously documented, their status as presented herein appears to be valid.

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