

## THE MISSISSIPPI KITE

Observations of the Vermilion Flycatcher:Washington County, Mississippi

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The Vermilion Flycatcher (Pyrocephalus rubinus) was first observed in Washington County in recent years by Lula Coffey on 2 January 1972 at Lake Jackson during the first Christmas Count held in Washington County. The bird she saw was an adult male. Lake Jackson is an old oxbow lake, a former bed of the Mississippi River. It is lined primarily with Bald Cypress (Taxodium distichum) with various hardwoods and willows in the immediate vicinity. The lake is shallow, having been victim of silting over the centuries. It is approximately 4 miles long and averages only about 400 feet wide. The exact location of the first sighting was just off the only dike crossing the lake, which was formerly used as a logging road. The bird was feeding from a cypress tree. Subsequent sightings and accompanying notes follow:

- 8 Jan 1972: 2 males and 3 females (or immatures): seen by Polly and Wiley Mock and Ann and Randall Imbler and ourselves. Three more trips were made back to the lake with no success; the last trip was 5 February. Our inexperience with the habits of this bird at that time could indicate that we simply missed them.
- 24 Oct 1972: one bird at the dike area. We at first called this a female, but it could easily have been an immature. Several trips were made to the site during the winter with the last sighting on 31 December 1972. Two more trips were made during January and February with no success.
- 23 Nov 1973: one male back in the dike area. This bird had a slight whitish wash on the throat which indicates a second year bird. We made 7 trips to Lake Jackson between 23 November and 10 February, sighting the bird 5 times, the last being 10 February 1974. No trips were made after that date. On 6 January I entered in my notes: "...looked for more (birds) but no luck. First time we saw him, he looked in full plumage; second time he looked dull...could be 2 birds?".
- 21 Oct 1974: my notes read: "male is back (brilliant plumage) - also pretty sure another one was further down the lake, but it was too far to be positive". We had made a trip to Lake Jackson on 17 October with no luck. On 23 October my notes read: "2 males for sure, 1 immature almost certain, 1 female maybe". Eight trips were made through 22 February 1975 with success on every trip through 8 February. We saw 2

Vol. 6(1), July 1976

males on 2 trips, a male and a female on 1 trip, and single birds on all others. Three trips were made after 8 February with no birds.

7 Nov 1975: male in brilliant plumage is back at dike area. Trips on 19 October and 30 October revealed no birds. On 29 November another male was sighted on the Lake 2 miles south of the dike. On 24 January, Dr. Jerome Jackson of Mississippi State University brought 5 students to the area. Both birds were found and photographed. Efforts at mist net capture failed. Six trips in all were made after 7 November, the last being 22 February. Both birds were recorded on each trip through 15 February with none on 22 February 1976.

These beautiful birds have provided pleasure for all of us over the past 4 years. During this time we have noted several characteristics of the birds as well as ecological conditions related to their presence. The birds have never been seen far from water, always feeding from trees over the water or low growing shrubs at the periphery of the lake. When the wind is high they feed from low perches, and, conversely, when there is no wind they almost always preferred the very tops of the tallest cypress trees. Also, it seems that they would feed for a period of approximately 30 minutes, then fly off toward the land and denser foliage for a short while, then return. The bird we recently observed 2 miles south of the dike fed along the edge of the lake. Only on rare occasions did we observe this bird on the ground. All birds fed almost exclusively on the wing.

Probably the most convenient fact that we noticed was that the birds always feed in one general area throughout the winter. We rarely saw the birds south of the dike nor more than 500 yards north of the dike. Cypress trees are prevalent all down the lake, and it seems to us that one spot would be as good as another. Our birds seem to disagree. The discovery of the bird 2 miles south this year dictates that a new territory may be established, and will deserve our attention in future years. It appears that feeding territories are definitely maintained, having never seen 2 males throughout the winter close together. However, the male doesn't seem to mind the presence of a female or immature.

It was interesting to note that we never saw the flycatchers until our multitude of winter Cardinals arrived. This may be coincidental, but we can't help but believe that there is a possibility they are attracted somehow by the presence of Cardinals.

During the past 4 years, we have had 2 significant snows: 4 inches on 10 January 1973 and 1 inch on 14 January 1975. An ice storm occurred on 7 January 1974. The temperatures during the years ranged from lows of 11° in 1976 to 21° in 1973 and 1974. Although we have had no extended periods of severely cold weather, we can conclude that abrupt changes to short periods of severe cold and/or precipitation fail to drive them out.

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Many unanswered questions have developed. For instance, how did the birds find this spot in the first place? How long have they been coming here? Although there was a Vermilion Flycatcher reported on a Christmas Count in the 1960's at the Yazoo Wildlife Refuge by the manager, Mr. Cunningham, there have been no subsequent reports. Such a vivid and cooperative bird should have been noticed even by amateurs in the past years. Do we see the same birds year after year, or offspring of the birds? The 2 birds we observed this year were brilliant male adults which probably means they are at least 2 years old. With no accompanying immatures this year, will we have any more birds next year if these die? Where do they breed? Ours must pass up numerous ideal wintering sites each year on their way to Lake Jackson, unless they breed closer to us than the southwestern U.S. where they normally breed.

There are many more questions, the answers to which can be obtained only through more thorough study. The task of answering these questions could prove challenging, intriguing, and enjoyable.

Scarlet Tanager Breeding in Lee County

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In a six-acre stand of mixed hardwoods owned by J. E. Wesson, one mile west of Guntown, Lee County, Mississippi, a pair of Scarlet Tanagers (Piranga olivacea) raised at least three young.

A male and female tanager were first seen by me on 14 April 1974. A male bird was seen again on 5 May. I do not know whether these were migrating birds or the breeding pair since these two sightings were made during brief visits to the area.

The possibility of the birds remaining in the area was brought to the attention of Mr. and Mrs. Wesson. On 8 June between 06:30 and 07:00, Mrs. Wesson was awakened by a thump on the bedroom window screen. A Scarlet Tanager fledgling was clinging to the screen. An adult male hovered nearby and called until the young bird left the screen. A few minutes later a second fledgling flew into the screen. Again the male bird came and coaxed the young bird away. This happened one more time.

At least the last two fledglings flew to the screen from the same direction and left in a different direction. Mrs. Wesson was certain that these were three different individuals.

After hearing the above account myself, I hoped for an easy-to-find nest nearby. Unfortunately, it was not until 14 July that I was able to get to the area and search for the nest. I was unable to find it.

The previously known breeding range of the Scarlet Tanager extends south to west-central Tennessee and northwestern and central Alabama