

BIRDS IN AN ARMY CAMP

BY LIEUTENANT VINCENT P. McLAUGHLIN, JR.

OCCASIONALLY, either through accident, or some disturbance of the natural surroundings by man, a condition will occur which is extremely favorable to birds, and they are not slow to utilize that condition, using it as long as it exists, deserting it just as promptly when it ceases. Such a condition arose at Camp Barkeley, Texas, a hot, dry, dusty, locality which is practically waterless, when the Army Engineers built a sewage disposal system to serve the camp.

Camp Barkeley, built late in 1940, is in the southwest corner of Taylor County, Texas, about 200 miles directly west of Dallas. The country is mostly flat and treeless, with the exception of the mesquite, which has grown to the point where it covers most of the uncultivated land to a height of possibly eighteen feet, and must be kept assiduously rooted out, if the land is to survive. The camp proper is separated from the 'maneuver area' by a chain of low, steep-sided, mesa-type hills, which are densely covered with scrub oak and mountain cedar, and have a flat 'caprock' top stratum of stone resembling limestone. These hills form a natural amphitheatre, in which the cantonment area is located, and it was on the northeast edge of that area where these observations took place.

In the camp area, and the country surrounding the camp, birds have apparently always been quite scarce, the only common ones being the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Lark Sparrow, and the Desert Horned Lark. These three were the only breeding birds in the camp itself, both because of the lack of cover, and the presence of thousands of troops at all times. No waterbirds have ever been seen in the camp, as far as I have been able to ascertain.

The locality where the observations took place was known as the "Broad Irrigation Project," a long series of settling pools where the sewage generated within the camp was ultimately disposed of. The unpleasant connotations connected with the phrase "sewage disposal" did not seem to concern the birds in the least, as the engineers, concerned only with sewage disposal, unwittingly created a paradise, in that desert, of cool, quiet pools, with willow-bordered embankments and plenty of excellent cover, a haven that was previously unknown there. The birds wasted no time in using it.

The system consisted of a series of interconnected ponds, each about four hundred feet square, separated by high embankments which were planted with willow and alder to prevent their erosion. As the water passed from pool to pool, the algae count dropped, and when it finally

passed to the runoff ditches, it was fairly pure and clear. These final ditches were about a thousand yards long, parallel, a wilderness of trees, weeds, water plants and lush grass.

At the end of these ditches was a small dam, which impounded the water prior to its release down a dry stream bed, and caused a drowned woodland of low mesquite. The entire system, in fact, presented a perfect resting place for migrants, and a nesting place for residents, which had never been there before. As the war lasted, and the camp prospered, the pools were always full, creating an excellent place for ducks, although the lack of shore precluded the presence of shorebirds. However, late in 1944, and early in 1945, as the troop strength dropped, the water level dropped accordingly, revealing rich mud flats, surrounded by head-high weeds. Shorebirds were not long in taking advantage of the situation, and they were seen commonly all through the area from early spring until late October, 1945, when the pools, one by one, dried up.

Now the ponds and ditches are dried up and overgrown with rank weeds, with the mesquite moving back in where the willows were planted, and the sand covering the rich mud flats. But, although reverting to its prewar status of semi-desert, that small section of Texas has had a procession of birds which it probably never saw before, and may never see again. A briefly annotated list follows:

EARED GREBE.—The commonest grebe, which wintered in small numbers. Spring-plumaged migrants stayed until May 10.

PIED-BILLED GREBE.—Very uncommon migrant. Small groups of three and four were the largest flocks ever observed.—It did not nest, and was seen in the fall from August 18 on.

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT.—One record only. Four were seen May 22, very late record.

AMERICAN EGRET.—Quite common in the fall. As many as 15 were seen in one small flock.

GREAT BLUE HERON.—Very common permanent resident. No evidence of nesting.

SNOWY EGRET.—Common in the fall only.

(ANTHONY'S) GREEN HERON.—Quite common. One nesting record.

LITTLE BLUE HERON.—Quite common fall bird; as many as 40 at one time, in the middle of August. At no time were there ever any adults, either of this species or any of the other herons called "white" herons, seen near a nest.

LOUISIANA HERON.—Only one record, August 22, 1945, in the company of a small flock of Little Blue Herons and Snowy Egrets.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON.—Quite common. Four barely full-fledged young were flying on May 12, 1945, so that there were probably nesting activities. Twenty immatures were later observed in the drowned woods, indicating the possibility of a rookery.

YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT HERON.—Fairly rare. Fully adult birds spent the summer, and there was a possibility of a nest, although no immatures were identified as such.

WHITE-FACED GLOSSY IBIS.—One record only. Two individuals flew over the drowned woods on the evening of May 3, 1945, circled a while, then left.

MALLARD.—Very common permanent resident, although there never was any nest found.

BLACK DUCK.—Very uncommon winter bird. Several seen in February, 1945. They stayed until late March, then left. No further records.

GADWALL.—Common resident, possibly nesting. Scattered flocks of these birds spent the winters, and small numbers stayed on the pools all summer. No nests or young.

BALDPATE.—Wintered sparingly; uncommon migrant. Never more than 15 at one time seen.

PINTAIL.—Uncommon migrant, scattered individuals appearing now and then. First fall migrants appeared July 27, 1945, and stayed until October.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL.—Common winter bird; very common migrant, and a few spent the summers. This is one of the commonest birds on the ponds.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL.—Uncommon migrant. A few spent the summer, but there was no evidence of a nest at any time, although the birds were paired off.

CINNAMON TEAL.—Uncommon migrant. The first appeared April 1, and scattered flocks and individuals stayed until 24 were seen on May 2.

SHOVELLER.—Probably the commonest duck. Large numbers wintered, and even larger numbers migrated through. At one time, on one pond, 228 birds were counted, giving the impression that the pond was literally covered with them.

REDHEAD.—Uncommon in winter and during migration, although several were always on the pond. A few spent the summer of 1945, although their plumage was so poor as to indicate sick birds.

RING-NECKED DUCK.—Very uncommon migrant. A few seen with scaups.

CANVAS-BACK.—Uncommon migrant. Small flocks, up to 18 or 20, were present all through migration, and a few females spent the summer of 1945.

LESSER SCAUP DUCK.—Winters sparingly. Flocks of about 60 appeared about February 15, and stayed until May 7, 1945. A few summered.

BUFFLE-HEAD.—Uncommon migrant. Never more than seven seen at once. No winter records.

RUDDY DUCK.—Very common migrant. First appeared on February 2, and gradually increased until one flock on April 28 had about 400 individuals. Several spent the summer of 1945, including a full-plumaged male. No sign of a nest.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER.—One record only. The water was apparently too shallow for mergansers, as they were rarely seen on the ponds.

TURKEY VULTURE.—Very common permanent resident. Probably bred in the hills.

BLACK VULTURE.—Uncommon permanent resident. No evidence of breeding.

MISSISSIPPI KITE.—Uncommon. First appeared about April 28, and a few scattered individuals spent the summer. Although no nest was ever found, it is quite probable that the birds breed in the low mesquite woods near the ponds.

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK.—Very rare bird. One record only on the ponds, January 2, 1945.

COOPER'S HAWK.—Also very rare. Two birds, probably migrants, spent five days near the ponds, late in April, 1945, but did not linger.

RED-TAILED HAWK.—Uncommon permanent resident. Probably nests in the hills, as one or two were observed almost daily near the ponds.

SWAINSON'S HAWK.—Probably the commonest hawk. Scattered individuals seen constantly, and a pronounced migration wave seen May 2, 1945.

MARSH HAWK.—Very common permanent resident.

DUCK HAWK.—One to three individuals seen daily covering the ponds from March 4 until May 2. Although there were no convenient perches for them, they seemed quite content to perch on hummocks, wherever found. They fed almost exclusively on shorebirds, and on one occasion a female caught a Green-winged Teal. It seemed that at no time was there an occasion when there was not at least one of them in sight.

PIGEON HAWK.—Very rare; one record only, April 2, 1945.

SPARROW HAWK.—Quite common permanent resident. Nests commonly all around the project, and they are always in evidence.

BOB-WHITE.—Uncommon permanent resident.

SANDHILL CRANE.—Very rare; one record.—Two seen April 6, 1945.

SORA.—Rare migrant; only a few ever seen. More often heard at dusk during migration.

AMERICAN COOT.—Common migrant; does not winter. First fall record August 4.

KILLDEER.—Very common migrant; breeds. Young found June 10.

SEMPALMATED PLOVER.—Uncommon migrant; never more than a few seen at one time. Last spring record, April 28. First fall record, August 10.

WESTERN SNOWY PLOVER.—August 15, 1945, is the only record.

WILSON'S SNIFE.—Rare migrant. First seen February 26; last seen April 2. At no time were there ever more than a few of these birds, and they were exceedingly hard to flush. No fall records at all.

SPOTTED SANDPIPER.—Locally common. A few summered, although there was never any evidence of a nest. Quite uncommon in the fall.

SOLITARY SANDPIPER.—Uncommon fall and spring migrant.

GREATER YELLOW-LEGS.—Quite common migrant. Forty individuals in one flock April 28, 1945.

LESSER YELLOW-LEGS.—As many as 200 in one flock at one time, mixed with the Greater Yellow-legs.

PECTORAL SANDPIPER.—Very common migrant. First seen February 14; stayed until May 10. First fall migrants seen July 17, and commonly thereafter.

WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER.—Common migrant. A very late migrant, it did not appear at all until May 10, when small groups of two and three were present, exclusively with the Dowitchers. Their numbers increased until there were possibly 275 to 300 on May 28. Although still here on the first of June, the fall migrants appeared July 25, still in the company of the Dowitchers.

BAIRD'S SANDPIPER.—Very uncommon migrant. Only a few ever seen at one time, except during the week of April 14 to 22, when a flock of about 60 was scattered all over one of the pools. This flock stayed together, by itself.

LEAST SANDPIPER.—Uncommon migrant. A few were present from March 15 until June 1. Fall migrants first appeared on July 25.

(? LONG-BILLED) DOWITCHER.—One of the commonest shorebirds on the entire project. First seen March 14, 1945, they gradually increased until there were probably 2000 on April 20. Every pool had its large flock, and they were overflowing into the adjacent fields. The Duck Hawks fed almost exclusively on the flocks, and would plunge into them every time they had the chance.

STILT SANDPIPER.—Uncommon migrant. First seen April 10; last seen May 26. Never more than six or seven to a flock, usually with the phalaropes. First fall migrants August 6.

SEMPALMATED SANDPIPER.—Common migrant. Large flocks, probably thousands of "peeps" were always present, although the flocks were usually too far away

to be identified with certainty either as this or the next species. Numbers of both were identified although the status of neither was determined.

WESTERN SANDPIPER.—Common migrant (*See* preceding species).

HUDSONIAN GODWIT.—Very rare migrant. Two individuals appeared on the project April 28 and spent the day. They associated with Greater Yellow-legs or stayed by themselves, and left in the early evening.

AMERICAN AVOCET.—Never seen until the water receded. First seen April 28, gradually increasing until as many as 30 were seen at once. On June 9, nine pairs were present, but spent their time on inaccessible islands, where they were probably breeding. As the water receded further, two nests were found, all with eggs, and later six more nests. On July 6, eight nests were present, each with four eggs, and on July 13, they were all washed out by a heavy rainstorm. Many nests must have been successful, however, as there were 25 immatures present on July 27. They stayed until late September.

BLACK-NECKED STILT.—First appeared May 14. Stayed through June, and eight were seen on July 1, apparently male and female, although no nests were ever found. They objected violently to everyone's presence near them, and there is no doubt that they were nesting. They were last seen August 22.

WILSON'S PHALAROPE.—Very common migrant. First seen April 2, gradually increasing until they were by far the commonest bird on the ponds. There were an estimated 4000 on May 10, but they were all gone by May 16.

First southbound migrants appeared July 7, and they increased until there were about 300 on August 3. Not nearly so common as in the spring.

HERRING GULL.—Uncommon in winter; only a few.

FRANKLIN'S GULL.—One seen April 6; about 30 April 22. All gone May 1.

LEAST TERN.—One record only, April 29. This bird appeared in the early evening, landed for a while, then continued cross-country northward.

BLACK TERN.—Common migrant. First appeared April 28 and stayed until May 19. A few fall records, beginning July 15.

MOURNING DOVE.—Very common permanent resident. As the commonest wild-flower in the entire camp was the wild sunflower, these birds prospered. Nests with eggs as late as August 3.

YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO.—Uncommon migrant, which probably breeds. Seen sparingly all summer, usually carrying food.

SCREECH OWL.—Rare permanent resident.

(WESTERN) BURROWING OWL.—Two records only; one bird on November 12, 1944, and one only on February 8, 1945.

NIGHTHAWK.—Very common breeding bird.

CHIMNEY SWIFT.—Very common migrant and summer resident.

BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD.—Fairly common summer resident.

BELTED KINGFISHER.—Unaccountably rare. One pair, only, seen during the entire period, in the midsummer of 1945.

RED-SHAFTED FLICKER.—Fairly common winter resident. No summer records.

GILA WOODPECKER.—Uncommon permanent resident. Usually one pair could be found at all times, although they seemed partial to live-oak groves, which did not occur near the project. May possibly nest.

HAIRY WOODPECKER.—Quite rare permanent resident.

DOWNY WOODPECKER.—Fairly common permanent resident. Nests occasionally; two found.

LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER.—Rare permanent resident. Possibly nests.

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER.—One record only; August 10, 1945.

EASTERN KINGBIRD.—Rare migrant. Several seen May 12, 1945, in a flock of Arkansas Kingbirds, but not otherwise observed.

ARKANSAS KINGBIRD.—Common migrant; April 2 until May 18, 1945.

SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER.—The most common bird of note. They first appear about the last of March, and seem to sit atop every fence post and pole. They seem quite fearless, as one nest with four young was found ten feet from the entrance to an officers' club.

Nests were found June 10, 19, 22, and 28. In the fall, large flocks of these birds sit on exposed ridges, facing into the wind, looking like large flocks of sandpipers.

BLACK PHOEBE.—One record only; May 14, 1945.

VERMILION FLYCATCHER.—One record only; September 18, 1943.

DESERT HORNED LARK.—A few around the project at all times, although they are quite common on the flatlands of the range, several miles west of the project.

TREE SWALLOW.—A few migrants May 13, 1945, straggling from a large flock seven miles west.

ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW.—A few skimming the pools during the summer, seemingly strays from a nesting colony south of the project. No swallows nested on the project, proper.

BARN SWALLOW.—Several seen May 6, 1945, the only record.

CLIFF SWALLOW.—A few on the pools, stragglers from large colonies south of here, where possibly 300 pairs nested under one bridge.

PURPLE MARTIN.—First arrivals about the end of March. Nesting commonly.

BLUE JAY.—Very rare on the project. Only one record, although these jays are quite common twenty miles south.

WHITE-NECKED RAVEN.—Permanent resident, quite common, although commoner in the winter than summer. All winter long, lines of them straggled from their roost in the woods to the south; then in the evening they straggled north again.

AMERICAN CROW.—Although both ravens and crows are locally called "crows," the crow is quite rare. The only safe method of identification is its note, which is quite different from the raven's. It is a permanent resident south of here.

(? BLACK-CAPPED) CHICKADEE.—The chickadee here is a quite common permanent resident, and although it seems to be the Black-capped, the note of the local birds is considerably different from that of the Northern Black-cap.

BLACK-CRESTED TITMOUSE.—Rare resident. Seen only once on the project and sparingly elsewhere. They seem to prefer live-oak groves.

PLAIN TITMOUSE.—Rare resident. Never seen on the project, although seen several times to the north and south of it, more commonly in winter than summer.

VERDIN.—First migrants on April 28, and common thereafter. They nest quite commonly in the mesquite woods, where their notes can be heard all day long, no matter the heat.

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH.—One record only, November 28, 1944.

BEWICK'S WREN.—The common summertime wren. They first appear about the middle of February, and sing in every yard until late fall. No nests ever found.

LONG-BILLED MARSH WREN.—Very rare spring migrant. First seen April 2, 1945; stayed until April 20. Despite the presence of ideal breeding grounds, they were not found all summer.

ROCK WREN.—Rare summer resident. One record on the project, although they nest south of the range, where nests have been found. Probably common on the rocky parts of the maneuver area, which are mostly inaccessible.

CAROLINA WREN.—Rare and local. One record on the project, November 18, 1944, although it occasionally appears in the settled parts of the county. ■

(WESTERN) MOCKINGBIRD.—Probably the one common bird that seems to be in all places.

BROWN THRASHER.—One record only; two on April 2, 1945.

ROBIN.—Rare migrant and winter resident. A small flock seen October 22, 1944.

EASTERN BLUEBIRD.—Uncommon winter resident. Occasionally seen in small flocks all winter. Usually gone by the end of February.

CEDAR WAXWING.—Common permanent resident. As the hills south of the camp are covered with mountain cedar, this bird abounds. Large flocks are always in evidence.

(? WHITE-RUMPED) SHRIKE.—Common permanent resident. A nest, with five half-grown young, was found April 28, 1945.

STARLING.—Very common winter resident, in the company of cowbirds and red-wings. They spend the entire winter around the buildings in camp and in town, and are all gone by the middle of March.

HUTTON'S VIREO.—Rare migrant. Two seen May 12, 1944.

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER.—Rare winter resident. An occasional individual seen on each field trip all winter long. Usually gone by the middle of April.

CALAVERAS WARBLER.—An occasional spring migrant. Two until April 28, 1945.

YELLOW WARBLER.—Rare migrant. Only two records; April 26 and May 4, 1945.

MYRTLE WARBLER.—Rare winter resident. First seen about December 5, staying until late February. Commoner in towns.

(? WESTERN) YELLOW-THROAT.—Rare migrant; one record, April 28, 1945.

ENGLISH SPARROW.—Very common permanent resident. These birds are much commoner in the country, where they nest in colonies in trees.

WESTERN MEADOWLARK.—Common winter resident. Identified by notes alone, although an occasional 'Eastern-sounding' song is heard. They start to sing about February 1, and are all gone by the end of April.

YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD.—Common migrant. First seen March 26 and commonly thereafter until late April. First fall migrants seen about July 13 in full spring plumage.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD.—Common permanent resident.

ORCHARD ORIOLE.—Surprisingly common. Full-plumaged males in full song are quite common all through May and June, although no amount of searching has revealed a nest. As there were females present also, it was reasonable to assume the presence of nests, so many hours were spent with no success looking for at least one.

SCOTT'S ORIOLE.—One record only, probably a straggler, June 10, 1944.

BULLOCK'S ORIOLE.—Very common summer resident. First appeared about April 1, and was constantly present all summer long. No nests, although plenty of immatures were seen towards the end of summer. These birds were present in every dooryard.

BREWER'S BLACKBIRD.—Fairly common winter resident. Usually in the company of starlings, cowbirds, and red-wings. Gone by the middle of March.

BRONZED GRACKLE.—Common summer resident. Occasionally seen on the project, but they were quite common in town. Large flocks about August 3 on the project.

GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE.—Only one record on the project, July 25, 1945.

COMMON COWBIRD.—Very common winter resident, not seen in summer.

CARDINAL.—Very common permanent resident.

BLUE GROSBEAK.—Uncommon summer resident. First appeared April 28, and remained, a few here and there. Parents feeding half-grown young August 6, 1945, so it definitely breeds. However, no actual nests were found.

PAINTED BUNTING.—Common summer resident. First migrants about April 12, then quite common thereafter. No doubt nests, though no nests were ever found.

HOUSE FINCH.—Very common permanent resident.

ARKANSAS GOLDFINCH.—Uncommon permanent resident, preferring the tops of the cedar hills. Quite rare on the project, although they have been seen there.

CANYON TOWHEE.—One record only, April 12, 1945.

LARK BUNTING.—Rare migrant. One record only; two seen October 2, 1945.

(WESTERN) SAVANNAH SPARROW.—Rare migrant, none seen after May 1, 1945.

(WESTERN) GRASSHOPPER SPARROW.—Common migrant, April 24 until May 15.

(WESTERN) VESPER SPARROW.—Common migrant, April 15 until May 18.

RUFIOUS-CROWNED SPARROW.—This pretty sparrow was a rare migrant, appearing early and singing softly in secluded places. The latest record was on May 1, when at least ten of the birds were seen on the project at one time.

DESERT SPARROW.—Rare summer resident; breeding. This secretive bird arrived unheralded, and it did not sing until May 3, when it was first seen. No nests were ever found, although the birds were locally common all summer until July 29, when many immatures were seen, apparently migrating southward. There were no further records after August 1.

CASSIN'S SPARROW.—Common summer resident, first appearing about March 21. Although they are fairly common, they are quite secretive, and difficult to locate, both because of this and the ventriloquial nature of their song. Twenty-three singing males were found on July 23, but at no time were any nests found.

PINK-SIDED JUNCO.—Common resident from late November until February 18. Although juncos were quite common, no other species was identified, so they were all assigned to this form.

LINCOLN'S SPARROW.—On March 22, 1945, several were seen on the project, furnishing the only record. The birds were not singing, so it can be assumed that they probably migrate through there quite commonly, but secretively. They winter commonly in San Antonio, about 280 miles south.

(WESTERN) CHIPPING SPARROW.—Rare migrant, seen and heard from April 1 until May 10. Some have been seen in late August, but are presumed to be early migrants and not summer birds.

BREWER'S SPARROW.—Very common migrant. Large flocks of this delightful bird were in every grove and dooryard from April 8 until the middle of May. They reappear about September 1 and stay until the middle of October, easily identified by their peculiar buzzing song.

FIELD SPARROW.—Rare migrant. Last seen May 1, 1945, although some appeared on August 10—probably early south-bound migrants.

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW.—Common winter resident. Seen all winter long in the damper wooded parts of the drowned forest. Last seen April 26.

SONG SPARROW.—Very rare; one record only, April 22 to 28, 1945.

Tentative identifications were made of Texas Nighthawks and Poorwills, although it was never possible to confirm this through observations, and no collecting was done as it was not permitted on the reservation.

CONCLUSIONS

It will be seen that between sixty-five and seventy species were benefited by the temporary presence of the project, as it furnished a resting place for them in the middle of the dry wilderness of West Texas, a situation which does not exist, as far as I could ascertain, for several hundred miles north or south of there. It is certain that the residents of the area benefited by its presence, as they were definitely more common in that particular spot than they were anywhere else on the reservation. It was unfortunate that I could not take more time from military duties to carry on my observations further, as I am certain that many more interesting notes could have been made.

Camp Gruber, Oklahoma

January 26, 1946

(Rec'd. March 17, 1947)

OBSERVATIONS ON NESTING ASSOCIATES

BY J. SOUTHGATE Y. HOYT

Plate 7

INTRODUCTION

ANYONE who has done much field work is certain to have had some interesting and even strange experiences with nesting birds. It was my belief at first that these unusual incidents were possibly very rare and that such observations were few and far between. Upon talking to many persons with considerable field experience I find that most of them have noted incidents that are of particular interest to our understanding of bird relationships and especially bird associations. Many of these incidents should be published for the benefit of those of us who are interested in the life-history phase of bird work. We are apt to make statements pertaining to the isolation or territory tolerance of certain birds to other species and then find several exceptions. If all were known from all possible sources possibly our ideas of territory tolerance might change a little. Such has been the case with my own work. It is with this in mind that I present this collection of observations on several species of birds.

1. RED-EYED TOWHEE AND FIELD SPARROW SHARE NESTING SITE

On June 6, 1942, Mrs. Hoyt and I found a white pine on a heavily wooded area near Ithaca, New York, that contained two nests, both