



THE SPOONBILL

VOLUME 1 - NUMBER 3 - Nov. 8, 1952

Many of you folks may not know it, but our Recorder, Frank G. Watson, is also reporter for Audubon Field Notes in the South Texas Region. We want you to have the benefit of his experience in reporting and are sure you will appreciate his efforts.

Following is the South Texas report prepared for Audubon Field Notes for the summer season of 1952. It summarizes weather conditions which affected bird life during the period, it tells who submitted reports and what they saw. It is a guide to you in that it will indicate what type of information you should send our recorder to assist him in preparing these reports and thus make the reports for our area more complete. These reports are prepared four times a year, each covering one of the following: winter season, spring migration, summer season and fall migration.

In the Texas coastal area the summer months, June, July and August, were warmer and drier than usual. The season started with adequate rainfall, however before the summer was over the region was suffering a serious drought. Conditions in the Houston area are outlined as follows. The lowest temperature was 64° on June 1 while the highest was 98° , registered on four days in August. The entire three-month average was 1.2° above average. Rainfall which averages 4 to $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches per month in the summer was about 20 percent below normal in June and 10 percent below normal in July, however it was only about one-quarter of normal in August. The high temperatures of August, combined with its rather drastic dryness, resulted in a very listless small bird population and a seemingly birdless woods in most deciduous woodland areas. Strangely, birds typical of the pine woods areas to the north and east of Houston had a very good season in terms of numbers of nesting pairs and number of young raised. Notable were the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Common Bluebird, Yellow-throated Warbler, and Pine Warbler. In the Rio Grande Valley the drought was more serious. After a very dry spring rain fell on May 24 and on June 7 and 8 and put water in natural depressions, reservoirs, and ditches. There was no appreciable rain later in the season. The rains of late May were too late for several species which therefore nested in considerably reduced numbers. Species particularly affected were the Mottled Duck, only 4 broods of which were observed on the Laguna Atascosa Refuge, the Gallinules, and the Coot. On the other hand birds of the Rio Grande area which are accustomed to dry conditions, such as the Verdin, Curve-billed Thrasher, Cassin's Sparrow, and Black-throated Sparrow, had an excellent season. A cold front which passed over the Gulf Coast area on July 8 and 9, and which reduced both maximum and minimum temperatures to 5° below normal was an unusual occurrence for mid-summer. The effect of this was not immediately evident since apparently no one was in the field on those days; however, it probably was responsible for the presence of a young Solitary Vireo, a Black-and-White Warbler, and a moderate influx of Orchard Orioles, all observed at Santa Ana Refuge, near Hidalgo, on July 12 (LCG, GEH, FGW).

Those whose observations, either specific or general, contributed to this report are Donald Bleitz (Los Angeles, California), Miss Nance Cunningham, John Galley, Donald J. Gamble (Audubon Warden, Second Chain of Islands), Luther C. Goldman, J. M. Heiser, Jr., C. E. Hudson, Jr., Mrs. Minor A. Hurst, Henry W. Isham (Pasadena, California), William S. Jennings (Biologist, Texas Game and Fish Commission), John Larson (Audubon Warden, Green Island), Fred W. Loetscher, Jr. (Danville, Kentucky), Arlie K. McKay, R. J. Montgomery, John Morony, Noel Pettingell, Miss Lucile Robey, Alexander Sprunt, IV (Audubon Warden, Vingt'un Islands), Lawrence Tabony, Frank G. Watson, Stephen Williams, and Armand Yramategui.

Grebes, Pelicans, Herons, and Ibises. -- On July 11 a pair of Mexican Grebes with their nest and 5 newly hatched chicks was seen on a resaca south of Barrera (LCG, FGW) and another pair seen August 31 on a resaca near Progresso had four half grown young (FGW). Brown Pelicans, which decreased in numbers at the time of the heavy freeze early in 1951, had a much improved nesting season this year. At Green Island in Laguna Madre the nesting wading birds had a more successful season than last year. Food was more plentiful and the condition of the brush which was defoliated last year by the freeze was more suitable for nesting this year. Species occupying the island are Great Blue Heron, Common Egret, Snowy Egret, Reddish Egret, Tricolored Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, White-faced Ibis, and White Ibis. The White Ibis established their customary colonies while the White-faced Ibis nested at random over the island (JL). Wood Ibis

arrived in the Galveston Bay area in June, 65 being seen at Vingt'un Islands on June 11 (AS,FGW) and 50 at Cove on June 21 (AKM). Three were still present at Brownsville on August 21 (FWL) and 3 in Hidalgo County on August 31 (FGW). The direction from which these birds appear in Coastal Texas in summer is not known. The season for the Roseate Spoonbill at Vingt'un Islands was very good, the number of nesting pairs present taxing the carrying capacity of the main island. The nesting cycle at this colony was from 2 to 4 weeks in advance of that at other Texas spoonbill colonies(AS).

Ducks. -- Of considerable interest is the successful nesting of the Black-bellied Tree Duck at an artificial lake on the R. J. Montgomery ranch near Rio Hondo. Six pairs of these ducks averaged 12 young per brood, the largest brood consisting of 16 (RJM). At this location on September 1 a total of about 60 birds, including a late brood of 15 young, was present (FGW). This is the best nesting report for this uncommon species in the United States for at least the last five years. On July 11 three pairs of Fulvous Tree Ducks were observed in a fresh water reservoir near San Benito. Since typical nesting habitat was available it is assumed these few pairs nested, although no broods were actually observed. In the upper coastal region the Fulvous Tree Duck and the Mottled Duck had about an average season.

Hawks. -- Harris Hawks and Caracaras had a successful nesting season on the Laguna Atascosa Refuge. Only three young were produced from a total of three White-tailed Hawk's nests under observation on the Refuge. This was one young more which reached the flying stage than last year from the same nests. Red-shouldered Hawks had a normal successful season throughout South Texas.

Gallinaceous Birds. -- The Prairie Chicken had gone unnoticed in the Houston area for several years until April 6 when a pair was found on the prairie south of Deer Park (LR). This area was subsequently visited by a number of observers, usually with success, and counts as high as eleven birds were made. The colony probably consists of 20 or more birds. Birds were seen all summer however no young were found. On the Laguna Atascosa Refuge Bobwhite nesting got off to a slow start because of the dry conditions up through the third week in May. However, immediately following the May 24 rain covies broke up and the birds were then noted in pairs. The nesting season was excellent. Fifty-one families observed on the Laguna Atascosa Refuge in August averaged 11.4 birds each.

Rails, Shorebirds, Gulls, and Terns. -- In the upper coastal area the King Rail had a good season. Young birds hatched along roadside ditches or rice fields reached the self sufficient stage before these sources of water dried up. On May 22 a count from Port O'Connor to Aransas Pass showed 10 pairs of American Oystercatchers (DJG). Another pair was present in June on a shell bank at Smith's Point, Galveston Bay (AS). Thick-billed Plovers, Killdeer, and Willets, our most common shorebird nesters on the lower coast, enjoyed a fair nesting season. Because of the reduced habitat, however, they nested in smaller numbers. Immature Thick-billed Plovers were observed running about on June 14. By July 6, several sizes of young were noted, from just hatched to those already reaching the flying stage. Laughing Gulls, Royal Terns, Least Terns, and Black Skimmers enjoyed another good nesting season on the spoil banks, made when the dredges constructed the Intracoastal Canal through the Laguna Madre. Other species present were Caspian Tern, Sandwich Tern and Gull-billed Tern.

Pigeons and Doves. -- Red-billed Pigeons had a poorer nesting season than last year as did White-fronted Doves. Mourning Doves throughout South Texas were exceptionally abundant, being numerous enough to elicit comment from people not ordinarily interested in birds. In Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy, and Cameron counties an estimated 207,000 White-winged Doves were on hand for the 1952 nesting season. This was a moderate increase over 1951. At the end of the 1952 season the population had increased to 310,000. It was found that only 1 out of 4 eggs laid produced birds that were eventually fledged. Losses were mostly before hatching and were attributed to wind and rain as well as to predation by Boat-tailed Grackles, Green Jays, and snakes (WSJ). Ground Doves also had a successful season. A late nesting record was the discovery of a nest with 2 young at Santa Ana Refuge on August 31 (NC). The Inca Dove, a bird of residential areas and parks, has now moved northeastward into Wharton (SW).

Anis to Woodpeckers. -- Grooved-billed Anis had another successful nesting season. Groups of adults and birds of the year, up to as many as 25, were observed in late August in several places east of Raymondville, south to Bayview, and inland to the Santa Ana Refuge. The Merrill's Pauraque began nesting the last week in March. One nest under observation contained 2 day old young on April 3. Nests containing eggs were observed up to the first week in July. A very unusual find was the discovery of a Ringed Kingfisher on August 29 at a resaca at Brownsville (LT). Red-headed Woodpeckers were seen feeding young in a nest hole at the Little Thicket Sanctuary near Evergreen as late as September 14 (JMH). A species which has received little notice the last few years is the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. The southern and western limits of its range were outlined

this summer by observation of individuals or family groups at Cove (AKM), Sheldon (JMH), Humble (AY), and Montgomery (MAH).

Flycatchers. -- Two nests of the rare Rose-throated Becard were discovered on the Santa Ana Refuge this summer. One was found June 4 about 25 feet high in a hackberry tree (JM, DB, HWI). The other was discovered on June 26 when a pair of becards were seen carrying usnea moss nesting material to an elm tree. The nest was complete on July 1, with both adults at the nest. On July 12, the nest appeared to be abandoned but the pair of becards were observed nearby (LCG). Two family groups of becards totalling 7 birds, both adult and immature, were observed by members of the Outdoor Nature Club of Houston on a visit to the Santa Ana Refuge on August 31. Derby Flycatchers were again observed to have young in May and to be still caring for late hatched young in September. A Beardless Flycatcher was seen and heard calling on July 12 at Santa Ana Refuge (LCG, CEH, FGW). At least two families, composed of adults and newly fledged Vermilion Flycatchers were observed on the Laguna Atascosa Refuge. No reports of Vermilion Flycatchers were received from farther north, this species evidently not having recovered from the freeze of early 1951.

Chickadee, Mockingbird, Vireos, and Warblers. -- Well feathered young of the Carolina Chickadee were found in nests at Cove on April 5 (AKM) and at the Little Thicket Sanctuary on April 11 (JMH). The first Mockingbirds fledged near Houston were noted at Houston on April 1 (MAH). Two Yellow-green Vireos were singing at Santa Ana Refuge on July 12 (LCG, CEH, FGW). A pair of White-eyed Vireos with young just out of the nest was seen at Bandera on September 13 (NP). Sennett's Warblers are once more attaining normal abundance on the Santa Ana Refuge following the freeze of early 1951. Adults were feeding young the first week in April. On July 12, the odd scene of a diminutive Sennett's Warbler feeding a lumbering, immature Red-eyed Cowbird with an insatiable appetite was observed. (LCG, CEH, FGW).

Blackbirds, Orioles, and Tanagers. -- Redwings nested in moderate numbers in the Houston-Galveston area however by early July broods had been reared and nesting areas had become quite dry. Apparently due to the drought most of the birds left the area as few were observed later in the summer. An Orchard Oriole nest found on June 3 seven miles south of Alamo contained one cowbird's egg and one other strange, unidentified egg (DB). Most Orchard Orioles had migrated south before mid-August, however a single bird was seen at Galveston on September 7 (FGW). Bullock's Orioles nested more commonly in the Rio Grande Valley than last year (LCG). Summer Tanagers arrived early and were found building nests in the Rio Grande Valley on March 20. One nest in the Valley area contained a full compliment of eggs on March 28 (LCG).

Finches and Sparrows. -- In three days of birding in the Del Rio area only 4 Pyrrhuloxias were found, these on June 1 on the desert between Del Rio and Devil's River (JG). Two pairs of Indigo Buntings with well grown young were seen near Montgomery on August 10 (FGW). Texas Sparrows were common in the southern part of the region. At Santa Ana Refuge a nest containing 4 eggs was being incubated on July 12 (LCG, CEH, FGW). Previous to this year Henslow's Sparrows had not been seen in South Texas in summer. It was with some surprise that six singing males of this species were found on the prairie south of Deer Park on May 27 (FGW). Further exploration on later days by several people showed the presence of at least 21 singing males over an area of about one square mile. No others could be found on similar prairie elsewhere. The birds continued to sing from territorial perches until at least July 27 when 3 were seen and heard. Unfortunately it could not be definitely established that the birds were nesting. Botteri's and Cassin's Sparrows were normally common nesters on the Laguna Atascosa Refuge this summer. A Cassin's Sparrow nest observed there on June 20 contained newly hatched young. Black-throated Sparrow fledglings left a nest under observation on the Laguna Atascosa Refuge on the same date (LCG).

* * *

Now that we have grown to a Group of fifty-five members we want you to know all our names. Here they are: Nel Anthor, Lucille Barnes, Jerry Baker, Nettie Barnes, Dudley Bell, Bertha Blodgett, Agatha Boettcher, Luta Buchanan, Mrs. E. C. Carnes, Etta Coffman, Betty Crowley, Nance Cunningham, Frances Foster, Werner Gottsch and Mrs. Gottsch, Leila Grafius, Billy Green, Jimmie Greer, Vivian Hall, Joe Heiser, Carrie Holcomb, Harriet Hunt, Minor Hurst and Mrs. Hurst, Maude Hutton, Denise Johnson, Emmy Johnson, Dean Kendall, Oran Lively, Minnielea Lochabay, Francis MacMahon and Mrs. MacMahon, Anthony S. Manis, Dorris Massingill, Edna Miner, Charles McNeese, Leila Patterson, Arthur Peterson, Noel Pettingell, Ann Rios, A. A. Schultz, Mabel Smith, Alexander Sprunt, IV, Ruth Stamm, Leota Stilwell, Joseph Strehle, Lawrence Tabony, Katrina Thompson, Ellen Watson, Frank Watson, Josiephine Wilkin, Stephen Williams, Ella Wolfer and Armand Yramategui, also Hardy Fields, President, Outdoor Nature Club.

Field Trip No. 4: On September 28 Nance Cunningham, Carrie Holcomb, Frank Watson, George Williams, Stephen Williams and Ella Wolfer made a trip to the southwest tip of Galveston Island for the purpose of observing migrating hawks. The group arrived at 7:30 A. M. The hawk flight was light the first hour and advantage was taken of the time to study the various water birds and shore birds which were abundant. At about 8:45 the hawks began coming in some numbers and the heavy flight continued until about 10:30; however, the observations were continued until noon. The hawks seemed to follow a well defined path to the southwest and went directly over the observers. The only exceptions were Sparrow Hawks which flew the reverse direction. Number of each species seen were Sharp-Shinned Hawk 4, Cooper's Hawk 59, Marsh Hawk 13, Pigeon Hawk 2, Sparrow Hawk 8, Peregrine Falcon 6, Prairie Falcon 1, total 93 hawks.

Two all-night stations were in operation for the lunar count of migrating birds at the October full moon, nights of 3rd and 4th, one in Memorial Park, Houston, and one at Galveston. Short watches were kept on Saturday and Sunday nights at the November full moon. When tabulations are completed at Louisiana State University you will be told something of what was learned.

Frank Watson and Charles McNeese attended the annual meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union at Baton Rouge October 20 to 25 inclusive. A meeting of all Texans attending was held and consideration given to organization of a State Society. The reaction was unanimous as to need for such a society and plans will be announced later for an organizational meeting. Frank Watson caught a Yellow Rail.

Charles McNeese,
Chairman

November 8, 1952

