



Winter Birds and Birding in Oklahoma

By: Dan L. Reinking

Bird watching, or “birding,” as it is called by those who are actively involved in it, is one of the most popular and fastest growing outdoor hobbies in the U.S. It is popular in Oklahoma as well, with several hundred people involved enough to join the Oklahoma Ornithological Society, a statewide organization promoting the enjoyment and study of birds. Nearly one million more Oklahomans are at least casual birders, part of the one-third of adult Americans who feed wild birds near their homes. The amount of money spent annually on bird feed, binoculars, field guides, travel to see birds, and other related birding expenses amounts to over \$20 billion dollars annually in the U.S.—a very significant economic impact! Here in Oklahoma, \$193 million was spent on feeding or observing wildlife in 2001, with an undetermined but no-doubt large portion of that total coming from birders.

Why are birds so popular? A variety of reasons make birds the focus of wildlife observation for so many people. First, birds are everywhere. Whether one lives in a downtown urban area or on a farm or ranch, birds are found nearby. Birds are more easily observed than tiny insects or elusive, nocturnal mammals. Birds come in the entire spectrum of colors, and are beautiful to look at, as well as listen to. Their behavior is interesting to watch, and many species are easily attracted to feeders for close observation. Finally, humans have long been fascinated with flight, and gaze enviously at the aerial acrobatics of swallows or the graceful soaring of hawks making those lazy circles in the sky.

Oklahoma’s location in the center of the country and its 645 km (400 mile) length means that both eastern birds and western birds can be found within the state. A total of 459

species have been recorded in Oklahoma as of November 2004, giving it one of the largest state lists of birds. Many of these species occur here only a few weeks each year, during spring and fall migration as they pass through Oklahoma heading north or south. Others have occurred here only once, or very rarely as vagrants. The remaining species occur in Oklahoma for a significant portion of their lives, either as breeders here in the summer, as wintering birds here in the colder months, or as year round residents.

Over 200 species of birds nest in Oklahoma, of which about 40 percent disappear from the state during the winter. The Greek philosopher Aristotle explained the annual seasonal disappearance of birds by claiming that they buried themselves in the mud below ponds, but today we understand that that many species move south for the winter, either migrating a short distance to the Texas coast, an intermediate distance to Mexico or Central America, or all the way to South America for some species. Many individuals of our state bird, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, spend the winter in Panama, for example. This seasonal exodus might suggest that there are far fewer species of birds in Oklahoma during the winter. In fact, however, there are nearly 200 species in Oklahoma each winter, almost as many species as breed here. The reason for this, of course, is an influx of species from the north, to use Oklahoma’s relatively mild winters and largely ice-free reservoirs to escape the harsher climate in Canada and the northern U.S.

Many of the kinds of bird species which leave Oklahoma for the winter months are primarily insectivores, meaning that they eat insects. Flycatchers, vireos, and most warblers are among the species to move farther south when colder

Top picture:

Eastern Towhees can be found in brushy areas across much of Oklahoma during the winter months, though they are only rare breeders in far eastern Oklahoma during the summer.



Trumpeter Swans are rare winter visitors to Oklahoma, a result of reintroductions of breeding swans in the upper Midwest.

The Hooded Merganser breeds in a few areas of Oklahoma, but is more common on rivers and lakes during the winter months where it feeds on fish and invertebrates such as crayfish.



weather renders insects inactive. The kinds of species moving into Oklahoma from the north during the winter months are primarily waterfowl, birds of prey such as hawks, falcons, and owls, and songbirds such as sparrows and finches. Ducks, geese, and a few swans use Oklahoma's lakes and rivers during winter while similar habitats to the north are frozen. Geese may graze on winter wheat and consume waste grain in fields, while some species of ducks feed on fish or aquatic invertebrates, such as the Hooded Merganser pictured feeding on a crayfish.

A number of raptors, including the Rough-legged Hawk, arrive in October and leave in April. Others, such as the Red-tailed Hawk, are resident year-round in Oklahoma, but become more common during the winter months as birds from farther north take advantage of plentiful rodent supplies in Oklahoma's grasslands. Every few years, a Snowy Owl or two makes a winter appearance in central or western Oklahoma, drawing birders from all over the state to see this beautiful arctic species.

Among the most widespread, common, and easily observed birds arriving in Oklahoma during the winter are the sparrows and related species. More than a dozen species arrive here in the fall, only to leave again in the spring. The Harris's Sparrow deserves special mention, in part because Oklahoma is at the heart of the small winter range of this arctic breeder, and also because the late George Miksch Sutton, professor emeritus at the University of Oklahoma for many years, was the first person to find and document a clutch of Harris's Sparrow eggs. Prior to his discovery of a nest near Churchill, Manitoba, Canada on June 16, 1931, the eggs of the Harris's Sparrow were unknown to science.

A few other common winter sparrows in Oklahoma include Dark-eyed Juncos, White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows, Song Sparrows, and Fox Sparrows. The larger Eastern Towhee (pictured) is somewhat elusive, but can sometimes be seen foraging for spilled seed near feeders. Birders can attract the largest variety of species during the winter months by offering a variety of food presented in a variety of feeders. Black oil sunflower seed is the single best seed to offer. It appeals to a large number of species, and can be placed in a variety of hanging or post mounted feeders. Sparrows are attracted to mixed seed scattered on the ground, while woodpeckers and a few other species will utilize suet cakes. Providing water in bird baths is also useful year round.

In certain years, Oklahoma receives large numbers of irruptive northern species, while in other years these species are largely absent. Birds in this category include Pine Siskins, Red-breasted Nuthatches, crossbills, and the rare Evening and Pine Grosbeaks. Early indications are that this winter may be a good one for these visitors from the north, so keeping bird feeders stocked with sunflower seeds may pay off if you watch closely over the coming months.

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Photos by Bill Horn, an avid photographer who lives in Choctaw and maintains the www.birdsofoklahoma.net web site.