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OUR PRESENT KNOWLEDGE OF ALABAMA'S BREEDING BIRDS

By THOMAS A. IMHOFF

Two of the objectives of the Alabama Ornithological Society are to promote scientific and educational activities in ornithology and to coordinate and make available the findings of bird observations. Accordingly I have decided to foster in every way possible a better knowledge of the distribution of the birds of Alabama.

Members throughout the state are often in a very good position to furnish information vital to such a distribution study. I hope to show in this article and possible future supplements our present knowledge of these birds and what further observations are needed.

Members are urged to submit information on the breeding birds of Alabama, especially that which will fill the gaps shown in this paper. Short articles or simple records with breeding evidence should be sent to the editor of *Alabama Bird-life*. Any data that will increase our present knowledge will be consolidated in future papers with proper credit given to the observer.

A. **GENERALLY DISTRIBUTED BREEDERS.** The following list contains those species known as general breeders throughout or nearly throughout Alabama. Those marked with an "A" may be absent from areas of poor habitat rarely as large as a county: Green Heron, A-Wood Duck, Turkey Vulture, Black Vulture, Cooper's Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, A-Broad-winged Hawk, A-Sparrow Hawk, Bob-white, A-Turkey, A-King Rail, Killdeer, Mourning Dove, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Screech Owl, Horned Owl, Barred Owl, Chuck-wills-widow, Common Nighthawk, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Belted Kingfisher, Yellow-shafted Flicker, Pileated Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Red-headed Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Kingbird, Crested Flycatcher, Acadian Flycatcher, Wood Pewee, Rough-winged Swallow, Purple Martin, Blue Jay, Am. Crow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, A-White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Mockingbird, Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Wood Thrush, Eastern Bluebird, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, A-Loggerhead Shrike, Starling, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, A-Prothonotary Warbler, A-Yellow-throated Warbler, A-Pine Warbler, Yellow-throat, A-Yellow-breasted Chat, Hooded Warbler, House Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, Eastern Red-wing, Orchard Oriole, Purple Grackle, Summer Tanager, Cardinal, Red-eyed Towhee, A-Pine-woods Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow.

B. **BREEDERS OF LIMITED DISTRIBUTION.** Breeding evidence or even presence during the period May 15 to August 15 are needed throughout Alabama on the following species which

are either widely scattered, concentrated in colonies or in favorable habitats as indicated. (Strictly coastal species are in section C.) Compass directions indicate the main range of the species.

The Pied-billed Grebe (N) is known to breed in marshy ponds at Decatur, Columbia (Houston County), and Prattville. It summers frequently at Birmingham and other localities where turtles and lack of sufficient shore cover may hinder breeding.

The Water-turkey (S) is known in the breeding season from river swamps and lakes at Chuckvee Bay, Mt. Vernon, Carlton, Autaugaville, Greensboro, Coosada and, since 1950, at Decatur.

The Great Blue Heron, Am. Egret, Snowy Egret, Louisiana Heron, Little Blue Heron, and Yellow-crowned Night Heron. Information is needed on all heronries. Some are known from the Tennessee Valley near Decatur, Autaugaville, Sumter County, Mt. Vernon, Foley (formerly) and on the Ft. Morgan strip. Doubtless, many others exist. The Louisiana Heron gets rarer as one goes inland, being absent in north Alabama. The Little Blue Heron seems to be the most widespread.

The Black-crowned Night Heron is known to breed near Autaugaville and possibly also on Petit Bois Island. It is to be looked for in the bigger heronries, but may be found in pure or nearly pure colonies even in pines or cedars many miles from water.

The Least Bittern is an abundant breeder near the coast, a rare breeder at Autaugaville, bred at Birmingham in 1947, and breeds at Decatur. It likes reedy marshes, especially where there are cattails.

The Mallard (NW). Bred twice in Elmore County (Speigner Lake, 1914, and Fusihatchi Country Club, 1922); breeds regularly on Wheeler Refuge.

The Black Duck (NE). It is known to breed only at Wheeler Refuge.

For the Blue-winged Teal there is a recent record of a female with a brood of young near Wheeler Refuge.

The Shoveller (NW). There is an old record for Wheeler Refuge of the breeding of this duck.

The Hooded Merganser (N) bred at Autaugaville for many years and still does so in the Tennessee Valley, especially Wheeler Refuge, nesting in hollow trees in timbered river swamps and sloughs.

The Swallow-tailed Kite (S). One nest in Dallas County, in 1858, is the only breeding record for the state. It should be looked for along the Alabama and Warrior-Tombigbee River swamps where it possibly still breeds.

The Mississippi Kite (SW) bred at Autaugaville up to 1889 but observed more recently in the breeding season at Castleberry

and Stockton. It should be found all across the southern tier of counties as it breeds in nearby NW Florida.

The Sharp-shinned Hawk (N) breeds at Greensboro, Leighton, Sand Mountain, Lookout Mountain, Ardell (Cullman County), and possibly other places, but much more uncommon and more thinly scattered than the larger Cooper's Hawk.

The Red-tailed Hawk (N) breeds in most of the mountainous areas of the state, south at least to Oak Mountain (Shelby County) and also at Autaugaville and Prattville.

Bald Eagle. A few pairs breed near Gulf Shores and on the Wheeler Refuge, but elsewhere it is unknown as a breeder.

The Osprey breeds on the Gulf Coast and in the Mobile Delta but rare inland as a breeder. This is reported to nest in the Tennessee Valley between Guntersville and Decatur and was seen in June, 1911, at Autaugaville. Possibly other pairs may be found in the valleys of the Tennessee, Alabama, and Warrior-Tombigbee Rivers.

The Peregrine Falcon (N) bred recently near Guntersville, possibly also near Florence, and on Lookout Mountain near Mentone. It will probably be found nesting in numerous other cliffy areas of the state such as May's Gulch, Pisgah Gulch and others.

Ruffed Grouse (N). Residents of Sand Mountain and Lookout Mountain state that the bird still persists there in dense laurel thickets, although no ornithologist has seen one since 1913. They may also persist in the Talladega Mountains.

Sandhill Crane (SE). One small colony persisted until recent years near Foley and Lillian. Probably there are the most noisy in March, breeding in boggy openings in the pine flatwoods.

Purple Gallinule (S). Breeds in marshes at the head of Mobile Bay. It is to be looked for in marshes and ponds in the southern half of Alabama, especially where there are water-lilies.

Florida Gallinule. Breeds in locations similar to the Purple Gallinule but should be found throughout the state. So far, away from Mobile Bay it has been recorded in the summer only at Montgomery and Birmingham.

Am. Woodcock (N). Definitely bred at Leighton in 1892 and Greensboro in 1893. It is suspected as still breeding in other localities such as Decatur, Birmingham, and Tuscaloosa. It should be looked for at early dawn or late dusk in shrubby swamps.

Ground Dove (S). Common throughout the coastal plain, especially in rather open, sandy areas, breeding as far north as Northport. A summer record at Roanoke and several fall records at Leighton and Wheeler Refuge indicate that it may breed north of the coastal plain.

The Whip-poor-will (N) breeds in the mountains with breeding records at Sand Mountain, Lookout Mountain, and mountains near Anniston. It is to be looked for in the Talladega Mountains,

mountains near Birmingham and Gadsden, Little Mountain, and Monte Sano, at which latter place it probably breeds.

Red-cockaded Woodpecker. A piney-woods bird limited in its northern distribution by the availability of open pine timber. This precludes Lookout Mountain and the Tennessee Valley and nearby areas. It is found in the Talladega Mountains at least as far north as Duggar Mountain, on LaGrange Mountain near Leighton, and on Sand Mountain.

Eastern Phoebe (N). This species is one of our most active present-day invaders, rapidly occupying most of the state north of the coastal plain. In the last four years it has bred in Franklin, Morgan, DeKalb, Etowah, Calhoun, Blount, Walker, Jefferson, and Talladega counties and is also invading the Piedmont at Wedowee in Randolph County. It very likely can be found in all the counties north of Birmingham as Howell has records for Winston, Cullman, Marshall, Madison, Lauderdale, and Colbert counties. Most recent is a record of a bird in May by Morton H. Perry in western Bibb County near Payne Lake, our only coastal plain record. It has been said to breed on the Fall Line at Fort Benning, Georgia.

The Prairie Horned Lark (NW) breeds at Leighton, Athens, Red Bay, and Decatur in open, short-grass areas such as golf courses, airports, extensive lawns, and level pastures.

The Bank Swallow (N) is found in situations similar to the Roughwing, except that the Bank Swallow occurs in colonies. The only known Alabama colony was found in 1895 in bluffs along the Alabama River at Washington Ferry, Autauga County. Whether this colony still persists is unknown.

Barn Swallow (N). First found breeding at Tusculumbia in 1892, then discovered at Wheeler Dam (nest) in the 1930's, Athens (no breeding evidence) in 1939, and Cullman in 1946, and Decatur and Guntersville in 1952. It is to be looked for in the rest of the Tennessee Valley and the Coosa Valley in barns and under bridges near ponds. The Gulf Coast race breeds at Fort Morgan and probably other areas nearby. Although only recently discovered there, summer records for nearby areas as recorded in Howell indicate that this colony is not a new one.

Cliff Swallow (N). Another colonial swallow represented by a single colony which contained about 100 pairs in 1913 on high cliffs of the Tennessee River near Fort Deposit (south of Huntsville). There is a colony in downtown Chattanooga which was still active in 1952.

Am. Raven (N). A pair bred as recently as 1915 on high cliffs of the Sipsey Fork in southeastern Winston County and birds were seen in May of that year near Bridgeport. Remote, rugged country, especially cliffs and gulches such as on Sand Mountain and Lookout Mountain, probably contains a few pairs.

The Fish Crow is mostly coastal, although it follows larger rivers far inland at least to Jackson, Marion, and Tuscaloosa. Whether it breeds anywhere away from the coast is a matter of conjecture. Since it nests in southwest Georgia it may be found in Houston County.

The Brown-headed Nuthatch is a piney-woods bird limited more or less by sufficient tall pines (does not seem to prefer Virginia pine). It is found north at least to Ardell and Attalla and on top of Lookout Mountain at Gadsden and Anniston.

Bewick's Wren (N) breeds in the northern part of the state south to Hollins, Woodbine, Autaugaville, and Prattville. There are summer records at Northport and Roanoke. Any state breeding records south of these places are noteworthy.

Am. Robin (N). From a "rare breeder in the northern part of the state" Howell, this bird has made a truly spectacular invasion. It breeds rarely near Pensacola and in towns abundantly south to Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, and Auburn; while south at least to Birmingham, it is being found in smaller and smaller human communities each year. Definite data for most of the southern towns is lacking. In 1943 it could not be found in southeast Alabama below Auburn.

Cedar Waxwing (N). Several breeding records for Birmingham (1946 to 1951) and one for Cullman in 1946 are the only ones for the state so far.

The Yellow-throated Vireo (N) is known as a breeder southwest to Castleberry and Flomaton. It is to be looked for near Thomasville, Jackson, Monroeville, Citronelle and possibly even Bay Minette, Fairhope, and Mobile.

The Warbling Vireo (NW) is still known as a breeder only from Florence, where it nests in hackberries and possibly sycamores.

The Black and White Warbler (N) breeds commonly in leafy woodlands in the mountain areas south to Greensboro and Autaugaville.

Swainson's Warbler breeds in river swamps, especially where there is cane, on the Tennessee River up to Guntersville, the Alabama River up to Montgomery, and the Warrior-Tombigbee to Tuscaloosa and on the Choctawhatchee near Edwin in Henry County; to be looked for in any river swamp in the state.

Worm-eating Warbler (N). Scattered breeding and summering records in the mountain area are from deciduous shrubby hillsides in DeKalb, Cleburne, Cullman, Walker, Winston, Jefferson, Tuscaloosa, and Shelby counties and possibly also Chilton County.

The Blue-winged Warbler (N) breeds on Lookout Mountain, Sand Mountain, Leighton, Natural Bridge, Jacksonville, Woodbine, Autaugaville, and at least six localities around Birmingham. It is found in old fields that have a fair growth of saplings.

Bachman's Warbler was found breeding at Autaugaville up to 1919, Mt. Vernon in 1914, and Tuscaloosa in 1938 and 1939, at the edges of river swamps where blackberries grow. It should be looked for in the Warrior-Tombigbee and Alabama River swamps.

Parula Warbler. A common breeder on the coastal plains where there is abundant Spanish moss but less common and local above the Fall Line. North of this, breeding birds may be found in the Warrior River Valley to Ardell and Natural Bridge, at Guntersville, Sand Mountain, Lookout Mountain near Mentone, and at Erin and Woodbine in the Talledaga Mountains.

The Yellow Warbler (N) breeds at Florence, Guntersville, Decatur, Bridgeport, Attalla, Anniston, Tuscaloosa, and many localities around Birmingham. It also bred in 1903 at Autaugaville. It is found breeding most often in willows near towns.

Black-throated Green Warbler (NE). On Sand Mountain, Lookout Mountain, Duggar Mountain (Cleburne County), Talladega Mountains south to Mt. Weogufka, and Oak Mountain (Shelby County), this warbler is a fairly common breeder. In the Warrior River Valley from at least Ardell through western Jefferson County down almost to Tuscaloosa it is quite abundant on Virginia-Pine-covered bluffs.

The Cerulean Warbler (NW) is found breeding at Decatur near Florence, Monte Sano, Guntersville, Ardell, Erin (Clay County), Woodbine, numerous places around Birmingham; south along the Warrior River to Tuscaloosa. There is one isolated record from Autaugaville. It occurs along streams in tall deciduous timber such as tulip poplar, hickory and gum.

The Prairie Warbler (N) occurs in young second-growth south to Greensboro, Seale, and Abbeville, but it is absent on the coastal pine flats.

The Ovenbird (N) is known only from the mountains near Florence (where rare), Monte Sano, Bridgeport, Anniston, Lookout Mountain, Duggar Mountain, Guntersville, and Wedowee; to be looked for in leafy elevations above 1,000 feet.

The Louisiana Water-Thrush (N), Kentucky Warbler (N), and Am. Redstart (N), all occur south to about the Abbeville-Seale-Castleberry area and are absent in the pine-palmetto flatwoods of the coast. Their breeding limits west of the Alabama-Tombigbee Rivers are unknown. The Kentucky Warbler nests near Pensacola, and the Louisiana Water-Thrush has been seen in the breeding season near Tallahassee.

The Baltimore Oriole (N) formerly bred at Greensboro up to 1890 and at Leighton, Bridgeport, and Smelley up to about 1915. It is now unknown as a breeder in Alabama. The rediscovery of this bird would be welcome news. It should be found in shade trees around towns in the extreme northwest corner of the state.

Brown-headed Cowbird (NW). This is another actively invading species, unknown as a breeder until recently, and is now found at Red Bay, Decatur, Anniston, Birmingham, and Tuscaloosa. July records at Greensboro and Autaugaville may indicate that it breeds farther south.

The Scarlet Tanager (NE) breeds on Sand Mountain, Lookout Mountain, Monte Sano, Duggar, and Choccolocco Mountains, Gunter'sville, Talladega Mountains, to Mt. Weogufka, and in the Warrior River Valley at Ardell, Short Creek, Squaw Shoals (Lock 17), and near Lock 14.

Blue Grosbeak (S). This field border bird is commonest in Central Alabama, becoming less common on the coast and absent in areas of north Alabama. North of Birmingham it is known in the breeding season from Ardell, Carpenter (Sand Mountain), Decatur, Gadsden, Jacksonville, and Anniston.

The Indigo Bunting (N) is an abundant roadside breeder south to Greensboro, Autaugaville, Barachias, and Seale. Such a highly successful species must undoubtedly be found farther south where there is equally good habitat. It is recorded as abundant now near Tallahassee, Florida.

Dickcissel (W). This bird is common to abundant on fields planted to legumes in the Tennessee Valley and the Black Belt. Elsewhere there are breeding records in the same habitat at Tuscaloosa, Birmingham, Talladega, and Jacksonville. It may be found in DeKalb County where scarlet clover is being planted extensively.

The Am. Goldfinch (N) breeds south to Greensboro, Autaugaville, Auburn, and Abbeville. It should be looked for around Thomasville, Jackson, and Monroeville.

Grasshopper Sparrow (N). Like the Dickcissel, it is most common in the Tennessee Valley and the Black Belt but is found where there is suitable habitat in many areas in the northern part of the state as at Birmingham, Attalla, and Tuscaloosa.

The Lark Sparrow (W) breeds only in open areas near Red Bay, Florence, Leighton, and Greensboro. Probably it occurs elsewhere in the Tennessee Valley and the Black Belt.

Field Sparrow (N). The breeding range is similar to that of the Yellow-throated Vireo, Prairie Warbler, and Goldfinch. It is to be looked for in the same areas.

C. STRICTLY COASTAL BREEDERS. In addition, the following species are coastal breeders confined to salt-water habitats: Clapper Rail, Snowy Plover, Wilson's Plover, Willet, Gull-billed Tern, Least Tern, Royal Tern, Black Skimmer, Gray Kingbird (first occurrence of any kind resulted in the discovery of a nest at Fort Morgan in 1950 by Henry M. Stevenson), Long-billed Marsh Wren, Boat-tailed Grackle, and Seaside Sparrow.

D. EXTINCT BREEDERS. Carolina Paroquet.

E. HYPOTHETICAL BREEDERS. Species found to be present in the breeding season (May 15 to August 15) but without sufficient breeding evidence. (Locality and habitats are noted, and three recently introduced species are included.) Am. Bittern, Autaugaville and the Tennessee Valley in marshes; Brown Pelican, Gulf Coast; Double-crested Cormorant, Gulf Coast; Glossy Ibis, near the Gulf Coast in Florida and Louisiana but no state record even for occurrence; Wood Ibis, around Dothan and the Tennessee Valley; White Ibis, around Dothan and the Tennessee Valley with an unconfirmed report of a colony near Selma; Mute Swan, introduced at Bellingrath Gardens, Hayneville, Birmingham, and Fort Payne; Ring-necked Pheasant, introduced, mostly unsuccessfully in many areas notably Decatur; Virginia Rail, Birmingham in cattail marshes; Am. Coot, numerous records from Stockton, Hayneville, Marion (Fish Hatchery), Montevallo, Birmingham, Carbon Hill, and Decatur; Upland Sandpiper, Barachias, on a hay farm; Spotted Sandpiper, Autauga County, Stockton, Greensboro, Jacksonville, and several points in the Tennessee Valley, notably Decatur, where breeding is most possible; Oystercatcher, Petit Bois Island in 1898; Laughing Gull, Gulf Coast; Roseate Tern, Gulf Coast; Caspian Tern, Gulf Coast; Rock Dove, introduced in many areas, notably Birmingham and Decatur; Short-billed Marsh Wren, in August on dry, weedy areas at Tuscaloosa and Decatur; Painted Bunting, Mobile in hedgerows and woodland borders; and Song Sparrow, Fort Payne and Attalla in weedy, brushy fields.

In summarizing, there are 67 generally distributed breeding birds in Alabama, 67 species of limited distribution, 12 species confined to salt water habitats, and only one extinct breeder. In addition, there are 20 species present in the breeding season which may breed but for which we lack sufficient evidence. The total number of species definitely known to breed in the state is 146, of which 11 are not known to have bred in Alabama since 1938 or earlier.

For much of this information, I am indebted to the following members of the ALABAMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY: Thomas Z. Atkeson, William J. Calvert, Jr., Blanche E. Dean, Henry G. Good, Morton H. Perry, Millard F. Prather, David C. Hulse, Henry M. Stevenson, and Julian H. Rice. Henry M. Stevenson was especially helpful with an abundance of field data and many helpful suggestions.

REFERENCES CITED:

- HOWELL, ARTHUR H. 1928. "Birds of Alabama," Second Edition, Dept. of Game and Fisheries of Ala., Birmingham.
- STEVENSON, HENRY M. 1950. "Distribution of Certain Birds in the Southeastern United States." *Am. Midl. Nat.* 43: 605-626.
- 307 38th Street, Fairfield, Alabama

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A WOODCOCK NEST NEAR AUBURN

The American woodcock, *Philohela minor*, is a rare breeder in Alabama, and it is unusual when nesting birds are discovered. Several weeks ago, on March 7, a nest of the woodcock containing a full set of four eggs was found near Auburn, Lee County, Alabama. As I was exploring a swamp near Auburn, I was suddenly surprised to see a woodcock flutter clumsily into the air from under foot. The bird dropped to the ground about four feet away and displayed an excellent "broken wing" act. She flopped about erratically and frantically quivered her half-spread, limp wings. Several times she lay completely on the ground and dragged along on her side. This act was accompanied by many loud, harsh, nasal notes uttered by the bird. Soon after the bird flushed, I looked down in front of me and saw the nest and four light brown, heavily spotted eggs, all of which had their smaller ends pointed toward the center of the nest. The nest itself was a well formed depression in the leaf litter and was lined with loblolly pine needles and weathered dead leaves. It was approximately four and one-half inches in diameter and was constructed against a small decayed loblolly pine limb.

I made a second trip to the nest to examine it more closely and record its exact location. The bird was on the nest and so nearly perfect was her protective coloration that she was extremely difficult to detect, even though I knew exactly where to look. The nest was in a rather open spot surrounded by a dense second growth of sweetbay magnolia and black tupelo. The principal ground cover was a dense growth of switch cane which covered about an acre of the surrounding area. Sweetgum, loblolly pine, and yellow poplar were also scattered through the area. The nest was located on slightly raised ground in the junction of two adjoining hazel-alder swamps. It was approximately ten feet from one of the alder bogs and fifteen feet from the other. These alder thickets evidently served as the bird's feeding grounds. The nest was located 100 yards or less from open fields.

Several days later I flushed the male about forty yards from the nest. It is quite possible that the woodcock is more common in Alabama during the breeding season than is believed. Due to their retiring habits and seclusive ways, it is extremely hard to seek them out. No doubt many stay in Alabama to nest and are never discovered.—C. W. Summerour, Montgomery, Alabama.

A PHOEBE'S NEST AT AUBURN

On May 16, 1953, the nest of an Eastern Phoebe, *Sayornis phoebe*, was observed by Mr. and Mrs. H. B. Cunningham and the writer and his wife. The nest was located on top of a light fixture in the fish counting and holding building adjacent to the E-series ponds on the Agricultural Experiment Station grounds of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, just north of Auburn, Lee County, Alabama. The nesting pair had been observed for several weeks previously. This is concrete evidence of an extension of the range of the Phoebe and therefore is worthy of note.—Julian L. Dusi, Dept. of Zoology-Entomology, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn, Alabama.

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EDITORIAL POLICY OF ALABAMA BIRD LIFE

The editorial policy of **Alabama Bird-life** is to publish authentic scientific articles and field reports pertaining to Alabama ornithology and to publish articles furthering education in ornithology.

To be acceptable, manuscripts should be written in a direct, clear, concise style. Refer to past issues for examples. If references are made in the text, they should be cited at the end of the article in alphabetical order; for example:

Text

By careful reference to his field guide (Peterson, 1947), the writer was able to identify the birds. They were trapped by Kutz, 1945, method.

Citations

KUTZ, H. L., 1945, An improved game bird trap. Journ. Wildl. Mgt., 9(1): 35-38.

PETERSON, R. T., 1947, A field guide to the birds. Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, pp. 290.

The authenticity of records is of outstanding importance. Do not submit records which are uncertain. Any unusual record should be verified by the observation by a reliable ornithologist and preferably by the collection of the specimen by an authorized person. For unusual records, state clearly the circumstances under which the bird was observed and by whom and, if collected, where the specimen is placed.

Submit manuscripts to the editor typed on one side only, on unlined 8½" x 11" paper, double spaced (tables included). Omit tables wherever possible. Photographs and drawings will be published only at the author's expense.