ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

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CONTENTS

DOCUMENTATION OF UNUSUAL OBSERVATIONS

Greg D. Jackson

Of the several unusual bird sightings in the State each year, few are ever documented fully in print. Most of these sightings do make their way to the State Record Book and American Birds via Tom Imhof, but it would be useful to publish short accounts of these sightings in Alabama Birdlife. Sightings that would be appropriate would include first, second, and third State records; first records for a region (as defined in Imhof's Alabama Birds); first seasonal records for the State; and first occurrences of nesting in Alabama. Naturally, all unusual sightings will have to be accepted by Tom Imhof and/or the State Records Committee before publication. Probably the best way to submit these articles would be as soon as possible after the appearance of the record in the "Central Southern Region" report of American Birds. This will also let you know if the observation is as significant as you suspected (e.g. if it is really a second State record). This will necessitate a delay of 6-9 months in submitting the article.

Frequently people are rather timid about writing an article, particularly if they have little writing experience. To try to remove that fear, below is an outline of how a typical record article could be written. This is certainly not the only way to document a sighting, but you should strive to include, in some order, most of the points in the outline. Articles of this nature are greatly encouraged, for most people are interested in reading about unusual observations, and this will serve to document these records.

I. Introduction
   1. Species
   2. Date
   3. Number

4. Age
5. Sex
6. City/County
7. Significance of record

II. Specifics of observation
1. Exact location and brief habitat description
2. Time of day
3. Distance to bird
4. Light conditions
5. Length of time observed
6. Optical equipment
7. Description of bird (size, shape, plumage pattern, soft parts coloration)
8. Voice
9. Behavior
10. Proximity of other species
11. Documentation (specimen, photograph, tape recording, etc.)
12. Subsequent observations

III. Identification
1. Primary features of the bird leading to the identification
2. Similar species, and how these were eliminated
3. References consulted, and how these influenced identification
4. Experience of observer(s) with this and similar species

Articles on first nestings in the state would, of course, be weighted toward behavior (courtship, nest building), nest description, eggs, and young.

Again, these accounts are strongly encouraged, for without the proper documentation a record is almost meaningless. The publication of the details of these observations in Alabama Birdlife should prove to be valuable, educational, and interesting.

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PROTHONOTARY WARBLERS ACCEPT BLUEBIRD BOX

John Findley III

The only Warbler species in the U. S. that is a cavity nester - the Prothonotary Warbler (Protonotaria citrea) - nested in one of my Eastern Bluebird boxes this year in North Central Alabama.

Its one and only brood successfully fledged five young. It is the first time in seven years of my "Help! Bring Back the Bluebird" program that this beautiful "Swamp" Warbler has occupied one of my nest boxes. This represents hundreds of box nestings in both Illinois and Alabama. My four trails this year total 135 boxes. They are located in both Jefferson and Shelby counties nearing Birmingham, with most boxes in Oak Mountain State Park.

The Time-table recorded for the unusual nesting was as follows:

4 May 1983 Unknown non-bluebird nest found completed in Box #24 on Campgrounds' Site #101 in Oak Mt. State Park. It filled the bottom of the 4 1/2 by 4 1/2 box floor and was approximately 1 1/2 inches high. It contained mosses, grasses, and fine roots. It was cup-shaped.

17 May 1983 The bright yellow of the large warbler (5 1/4-5 1/2) was recognized as that of a Prothonotary even before the female flushed. Five cream colored, brown spotted eggs were found in the nest.

20 May 1983 Female flushed again. Five eggs were being incubated.

26 May 1983 Both male and female warblers were observed bringing food to the five small young. Photos were taken at close range from the car without undue disturbance to the parents.

1 June 1983 Nest empty. All five young now pin-feathered.

2 June 1983 Two young fledged and were being fed by parents outside of box in nearby trees. Three young remained in box also being fed. More photos were taken with long lens from car only 20 feet distance.

3 June 1983 Nest empty. All five young successfully fledged.

The nest was left intact, hoping to encourage a second brood. Further use of the nest and box by the warblers was not observed.

Bluebird Box #24 is placed on a utility pole on a campgrounds turn-around approximately 60 yards from the nearest water - a wooded and swampy back-water area of a state park fishing lake. This suitable Prothonotary Warbler habitat has had increased human use with "improvements" made to accommodate such use. This, in turn, has lessened acceptable nesting sites. The bluebird box apparently was a welcomed alternative.

With this in mind, an excerpt from the Field Guide to Birds' Nests by Hal Harrison is of interest:

"Of 84 nests (of the Prothonotary Warbler) in Southern Michigan in natural situations, 29 were over standing water, 32 were over running water, 23 over dry land, of these 43 were in natural openings, 41 in woodpecker holes."

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A ROADSIDE SURVEY OF THE RED-TAILED HAWK IN ALABAMA

E. William Wischusen[1], David T. Rogers, Jr.[2], and A. Michael Macrander[2]

The Red-tailed Hawk is a year-round resident in the Southeastern United States. Although there is a great deal of literature concerning this species (Fitch et al. 1946, Orians and Kuhlman 1956, Hagar 1957, Craighead and Craighead 1956, Luttich et al. 1970, Gates 1972, Wiley 1975, and Mader 1978) none of these studies was carried out in the Southeastern United States.

Prior to a study of the behavior and habitat use of this species, we conducted roadside surveys to determine the relative abundance and seasonal variation of Red-tailed Hawks in West-Central Alabama.

STUDY AREAS AND METHODS:

Survey routes were located in two study areas. Route A, 23.3 miles (40 km) long, was located in Tuscaloosa County. This route closely paralleled the Warrior River and was characterized by small fields and large woodlots. The terrain was flat, most of it being within the flood plain of the river. Route B, 40 miles (64 km) long, was located in parts of Hale and Marengo counties. This area was characterized by large fields and pastures interspersed with small woodlots. The terrain was flat to gently rolling.

Red-tailed Hawks perched or flying within 0.25 miles (0.40 km) of the road were counted from a vehicle travelling at 25 mph (40 kph). Two observers including the driver were present for all surveys. Observers used binoculars and a 20X power spotting scope to aid in identifications. Surveys were conducted at weekly intervals in both areas, weather permitting. No surveys were conducted during periods of precipitation. Ninety percent of the surveys were started before 12:00 CST.

FIGURE 1. NUMBBER OF RED-TAILED HAWKS SEEN PER MILE BY DATE IN THE TWO STUDY AREAS.

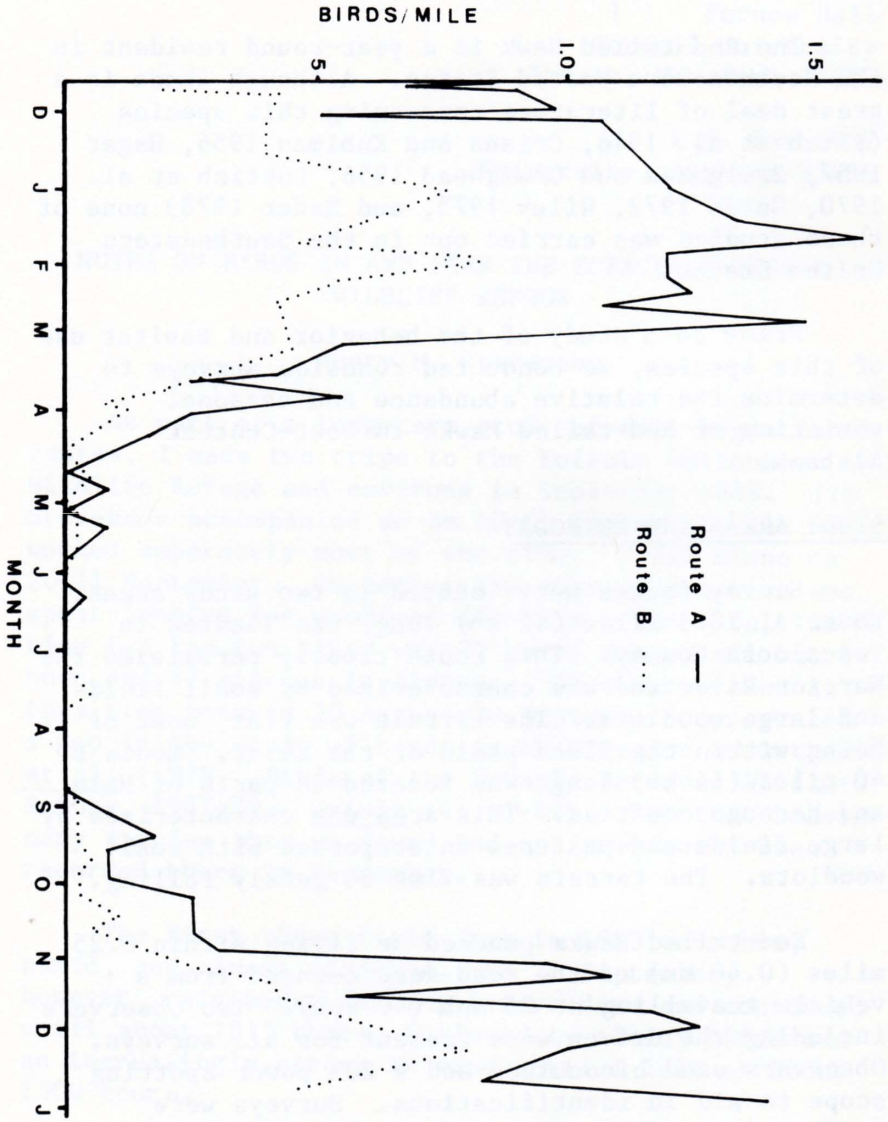

FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF RED-TAILED HAWKS MIGRATING PAST HAWK MOUNTAIN, PA. DURING THE FALL OF 1978 AND 1979.

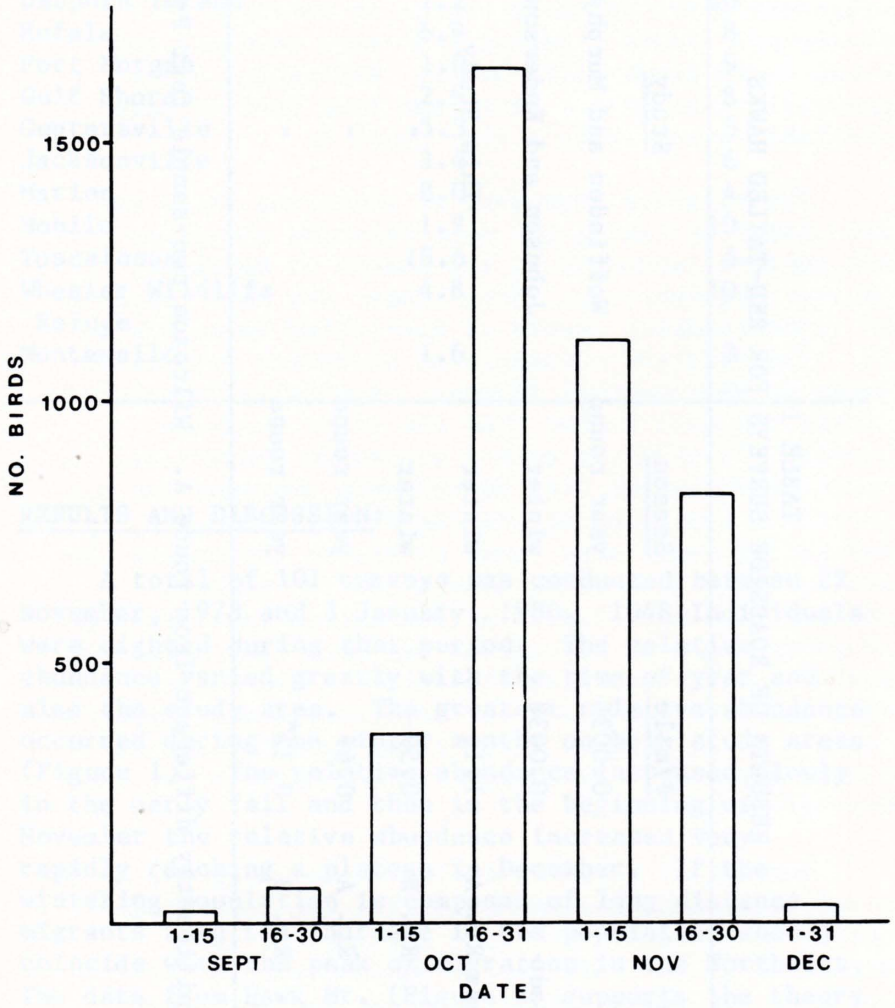

TABLE 1
RESULTS OF ROADSIDE SURVEYS FOR RED-TAILED HAWKS

State	#/mile	Season	Study
Utah	0.0035	year round	Woffinden and Murphy, 1977
Colorado	0.0038	winter	Johnson and Enderson, 1972
Alabama Rt. A	1.15	winter	This Study
Rt. B	0.59	winter	"
Rt. A	0.69	year round	"
Rt. B	0.32*	year round	"

* Significantly different from route A. Wilcoxon two-sample test P=0.05

TABLE 2
RESULTS OF CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS 1971-72 TO 1980-81

Location	#/10 party hrs	# of counts
Birmingham	1.6	10
Dauphin Island	1.2	10
Eufala	6.9	8
Fort Morgan	1.0	9
Gulf Shores	2.9	8
Guntersville	5.3	5
Jacksonville	3.4	6
Marion	8.0	4
Mobile	1.9	10
Tuscaloosa	18.6	5
Wheeler Wildlife Refuge	4.8	10
Montevallo	1.6	3

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

A total of 101 surveys was conducted between 22 November, 1978 and 3 January, 1980. 1048 Individuals were sighted during that period. The relative abundance varied greatly with the time of year and also the study area. The greatest relative abundance occurred during the winter months on both study areas (Figure 1). The relative abundance increased slowly in the early fall and then in the beginning of November the relative abundance increased very rapidly reaching a plateau in December. If the wintering population is composed of long distance migrants then the increase in the population should coincide with the peak of migration in the Northeast. The data from Hawk Mt. (Figure 2) supports the theory that the wintering population in Alabama is composed mostly of long distance migrants from the north. The

relative abundance began to decrease in March and April. In May it reached the low level of the breeding population.

The mean relative abundances for the survey routes are significantly different (Table 1). Twice as many Red-tails per mile were seen along route A as route B. Differences in the habitat are probably responsible for the differences in relative abundance. Route A passed near more woodlots and trees where birds could perch. Red-tailed Hawks generally hunt from a perch and more perches were available along route A than route B.

The relative abundance of wintering birds was calculated by taking the mean relative abundance for all surveys conducted in the months of December, January and February. This number was then compared to other roadside counts of Red-tailed Hawks (Table 1). The relative abundance of wintering Red-tailed Hawks in West-Central Alabama, especially Tuscaloosa County was much higher than the other roadside counts. In order to make a statewide comparison, ten years of Christmas Bird Counts were averaged for all locations reporting within the State (Table 2). Red-tailed hawks were found to winter throughout the state, again Tuscaloosa County had the highest counts. The mean number of Red-tailed Hawks seen per 10 party hours in Tuscaloosa was more than twice the number seen at any other location in the state. The high relative abundance in Tuscaloosa County appears to be a local effect. From these data Tuscaloosa County appears to be a major wintering area for the Red-tailed Hawk.

Surveys of major wintering areas may prove to be a valuable technique in monitoring the population status of raptors. For many species the fall migration is the only way to monitor population changes. If major wintering areas for different species could be found these might be reliable for population surveys. This technique would be less

time consuming than counting raptors during fall migration. The area around Tuscaloosa County seems to be a major wintering area for the Red-tailed Hawk and continued surveys in the future may point out important population trends.

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NOTES ON BIRDS IN AND NEAR THE EUFAULA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Henry M. Stevenson

As part of a long-term study of fall-migration routes, I made two trips to the Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge and environs in September 1983. Jim Stevenson accompanied me on 10-11 September, and we worked separately most of the time. I was alone on 20-21 September. On both trips most of the time was spent looking for woodland migrants. The total field time for the two trips was 25 party hours, all but 1 hour and 40 minutes in Alabama. Data were taken at this time because 20 August-20 September represented a gap in the study of birds in that region by Ortego et al. (1979. Birds of the Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge, 1967-79. Oriole 44: 61-87). For that reason many species that we found had not previously been recorded there in September.

The first three field days in 1983 were hot, humid, and almost windless. On 21 September, however, rain began falling before dawn and continued until about 1015 hours, followed by cloudy skies and an increasingly strong NW wind until I left at about 1500 hours.

Possibly because of the weather conditions, we found a general dearth of migratory woodland birds,

including both transient and summering species. For example, there were no Yellow-billed Cuckoos (Coccyzus americanus), Yellow-throated Warblers (Dendrocia dominica), Prairie Warblers (D. discolor), Common Yellowthroats (Geothlypis trichas), or Yellow-breasted Chats (Icteria virens), and only two Yellow Warblers and one Summer Tanager. However, because some records extend the previous known date limits (Ortego et al. 1979), those records are listed here. All records listed in their paper except those on Christmas Bird Counts were obtained on the refuge, but some of ours were as much as one mile outside the refuge.

Snowy Egret (Egretta thula). Both of us saw 6 feeding with immature Little Blue Herons (E. caerulea) at a refuge pond, 11 September. Latest previous 10 August.

Northern Shoveler (Anas clypeata). Two associating with Blue-winged Teal (A. discors) in a large pond between the state park and the refuge were early on 11 September (HMS).

Broad-winged Hawk (Buteo platypterus). An adult perched above a bridge on U. S. Highway 431 at the north edge of Eufaula, 10 September (HMS), was the first record for September.

Northern Harrier (Circus cyaneus). One just west of the U. S. Highway 431 causeway on 11 September (HMS) one day early.

Common Nighthawk (Chordeiles minor). Ortego et al. gave no record later than 4 August, but JMS had 3 on 10 September and I had one on the 21st.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird (Archilochus colubris). JMS saw one on 11 September; previous latest 15 August.

Red-headed Woodpecker (Melanerpes erythrocephalus). Apparently scarce on the refuge.

My only record was in the early morning of 11 September when a loose flock of 5 circled and undulated just west of the 431 causeway. During the time they were in sight they progressed irregularly northward. John Edscorn (pers. comm.) has seen such northward movements in fall in central Florida, and I have two other such records in north Florida.

Gray Kingbird (Tyrannus dominicensis). Shortly after the rain stopped on 21 September I saw an apparent Gray Kingbird perched on wires about 80 yards from me and less than a mile south of the refuge entrance. As I watched with 10X, 50 field glasses, it flew directly toward my position and attempted to light on wires there, only to be pursued by several Rough-winged Swallows (Steligidopteryx serripennis). It departed southward and I never relocated it. Although I could see no yellow underneath, I withheld a final decision until I could study museum specimens of its congeners. Both the Western Kingbird (T. verticalis) and the Thick-billed Kingbird (T. crassirostris), which have yellow underparts, were definitely ruled out on size and shape of bill. That of T. verticalis is much too short, and that of T. crassirostris is very deep, with a convex culmen. I noted in the field the long bill and flat culmen (except at the tip) of this bird. The Eastern Kingbird (T. tyrannus) was easily eliminated in the field by its smaller size. darker gray back, white tail tip, and smaller bill. There are a few inland occurrences of Gray Kingbirds in central and northern Florida, but the Eufaula bird may be the farthest inland occurrence in North America.

Great Crested Flycatcher (Myiarchus crinitus). Near the site of the Gray Kingbird I saw this flycatcher on 11 September. Previous latest 19 August.

"Traill's" Flycatcher (Empidonax sp.). On 11 September both of us saw one at the south end of the 431 causeway. After we separated, I heard it calling, the note closely resembling notes of E. traillii (Willow Flycatcher) I have heard in western North Carolina and Virginia. I do not know whether this one-syllabled chip can be distinguished from that of E. alnorum, the Alder Flycatcher. Ortego et al. gave no record of E. traillii and no fall records of E. alnorum.

Purple Martin (Progne subis). Two in the state park on 21 September (HMS) were the first recorded in September.

Swainson's Thrush (Catharus ustulata). JMS saw one in a creek bottom near U. S. 431 just north of the state park entrance, 11 September; first September record.

Yellow-throated Vireo (Vireo flavifrons). Ortego et al. gave no fall records, but we had singing birds just off the refuge on 11 September (JMS) and 20 September (HMS).

Blue-winged Warbler (Vermivora pinus). I saw one in Mud Creek City Park on 10 September. Ortego et al. cited only a spring record.

Yellow Warbler (Dendroica petechia). JMS saw 2 near the refuge headquarters, 11 September. One previous September record (Orgego, in litt.).

Northern Waterthrush (Seiurus noveboracensis). Only one fall record (Ortego et al.). JMS saw one in the creek bottom at the refuge entrance, 11 September, and I had one at the south end of the 431 causeway on 20 September.

Hooded Warbler (Wilsonia citrina). Although it was not previously accredited to September, we saw a total of 6 on the 10th, 11th, and 20th.

American Redstart (Setophaga ruticilla). Two by JMS on 11 September (at least 1 on refuge) and one by HMS near the refuge. No previous fall records.

Summer Tanager (Piranga rubra). No fall records on the refuge (Ortego et al.). I saw and heard a male within a mile of the boundary on 20 September.

I am grateful to Brent Ortego for reading this manuscript and suggesting improvements.

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NOTES TO CONTRIBUTORS

Submit all material on typed double-spaced pages. Figures and tables should be numbered and labeled at the top of the figure or table in all capital letters. Common names of birds should be capitalized and should include the scientific name at the first use of the name, e.g. Red-tailed Hawk (Buteo jamaicensis).

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