

# Birding Oklahoma, USA

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## **Overview of the trip**

March 23: arrival Oklahoma City and drive from OC to Stillwater

March 24: Stillwater

March 25: Sooner Lake

March 26: Sanborn Lake Park, Stillwater

March 27: Keystone Lake & Oxley Nature Centre, Tulsa

March 28: Tall Grass Prairie Reserve

March 29: no birding

March 30: no birding

March 31: drive to Broken Bow

April 1: Red Slough

April 2: no birding

April 3: no birding

April 4: drive to Selman Ranch

April 5: Salmon range & drive through panhandle

April 6: panhandle

April 7: no birding

April 8: Lawton, Wichita Mountains & Hackberry Flat

April 9: Eldorado

April 10: Wagoner County Sod Farms & Tulsa Sod Farms, Bixby

#### March 23rd

On March 23, two American birders (Jason Heinen & Vince Cavalieri) and two Dutch birders (Paul van Els & Sjoerd Radstaak) got back from their 10-day birding trip to Oaxaca, Mexico. For three of them their vacation was over, but for one it was not. I would spend the next almost three weeks birding in Oklahoma. I stayed at the other Dutchman's house, a friend of mine who studies forestry at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater. This is about a one-and-a-half hour drive north of Oklahoma City. We arrived at Stillwater almost after midnight and both fell almost immediately into a deep sleep.

#### March 24th

The next morning I got up early and went out for a little walk. The first new species I saw was a fly-over **American Crow (1)**, which proved to be one of the commonest birds here. Very common in the direct surroundings also were *American Robins*, *Northern Mockingbirds*, *House Finches*, *Mourning Doves* and *Northern Cardinals*. All of these I had already seen in Mexico the 10 days before, so I did not pay much attention to them. Paul told me the previous evening there was a running track close to his house, which proved to be good birding. It was kind of a park like environment with a field, patches of forest and some scattered bushes. While scanning the field with my binoculars, I noticed some meadowlarks that had to be of the eastern species: **Eastern Meadowlark (2)**. Western meadowlarks do not occur in this part of the state, but do more to the west. On that same field, I saw my second *Killdeer* ever, after the first one for the Netherlands in April 2005. After this bird, I returned to the house to have some breakfast together with Paul.



Eastern Meadowlark

After breakfast, Paul and I decided to make a walk through the running track. This indeed proved to be quite good birding. First, a flock of **Cedar Waxwings (3)** flew over. Cedars are much more common in Oklahoma than Bohemians in West-Europe, they are almost everywhere in flocks of a few birds up to over a hundred birds. After these cedars, we saw a flock of **Blue Jays (4)** flying by. A common bird, but what a beauty! After the jays, Paul noticed two **Red-breasted Nuthatches (5)** sitting on a telephone pole! These were common this winter but not every winter in Oklahoma, so I was lucky still seeing them! In some coniferous trees, we heard and saw a **Ruby-crowned Kinglet (6)**. In the small forest, part of the track, I saw my first **Dark-eyed Junco's (7)**, **Purple Finches (8)**, **Harris's Sparrow (9)** and, shortly, a **Carolina Wren (10)**. Especially Harris's Sparrow is a good bird that you can find in winter in just a few states outside Oklahoma; here it pops up almost everywhere. In some brush nearby, we saw a female **American Goldfinch (11)** perching. Walking through the forest we heard a **Field Sparrow (12)** singing and a calling **Pine Siskin (13)** flew over. At the edge of the forest, I saw my first **Eastern Phoebe (14)**, one of the few species that already got back from their wintering grounds further south. Over the forest, we suddenly noticed a **Coopers Hawk (15)** circling around – a species reminiscent of Northern Goshawk. In some bushes in which Paul saw some interesting sparrows in the past, pishing worked out well and we had good views of **Bewick's Wren (16)** and **Fox Sparrow (17)**, both quite good birds countrywide. After the Fox Sparrow, we saw another species of sparrow, which I had already seen in Mexico: *Lincoln's Sparrow*. Shortly before we reached Paul's house, I saw another two new species: **Eastern Bluebird (18)** and **Savannah Sparrow (19)**, both extremely common and can be seen in almost every type of habitat – the bluebird mostly also seen perching on wires along the road.



Eastern Bluebird

After Paul went to school, I returned to the running track. In the same flock of *Savannah Sparrows*, I noticed a different sparrow that proved to be a **Vesper Sparrow (20)**, a good sparrow countrywide also. After the bird, I walked around for a little while and found a flock of what I first thought were blackbirds. Coming closer I saw the rounded tails: they were **Common Grackles (21)**. Walking through the forest patch again resulted in a **Northern Flicker (22)** perching in a tree. After this last new bird, I returned home, watched some TV and waited for Paul to come home from school. Just before dinner, I decided to go out one more time. This time I didn't bird the track, but the adjacent green public space. Here I saw my new species within no time: **Brown Creeper (23)**, **Red-bellied Woodpecker (24)** and **Downy Woodpecker (25)**, and **Tufted Titmouse (26)**. Both woodpeckers are common, as with almost every woodpecker in the state. Brown Creepers I did not see that much during the trip and I believe they are not as common as their European counterparts (Eurasian and Short-toed Treecreeper). Tufted Titmouse is a huge bird compared to our tits (do not laugh) in Europe. What I also noticed is the variety in songs, as is the same for Great Tit in Europe. In the end, I had spifficating views of a perching *Coopers Hawk*, but unfortunately forgot to take my camera with me that evening.

#### March 25th

This day we left early to spend the morning around Sooner Lake, a 1-hour drive north of Stillwater, for waterfowl, (more) sparrows and Smith's Longspur. The drive to this so-called Sooner Lake, which is by the way private property, resulted already in one new species: **Double-crested Cormorant (27)**. Besides some cormorants en route, we also saw *Turkey Vultures*, *Loggerhead Shrikes* and *American Kestrels*. Especially Turkey Vulture are very common, it has to be the most common raptor here! Not a bird but awesome as well was a Coyote, eating a road-killed White-tailed Deer.



Coyote with road-killed White-tailed Deer

After we passed the security safely (please contact Jim Aterburn: [jimarterburn@cox.net](mailto:jimarterburn@cox.net)), birding started: on the lake, we saw lots of **Redheads (28)** and **Lesser Scaup (29)**. Although this first species was very common here, it was not everywhere! On small ponds and lakes most of the ducks around are Lesser Scaup and some Ring-necked Ducks, this is at least what I experienced by the time I was there. Also very common is *American Coot*. Less common (but not uncommon!), is **Pied-billed Grebe (30)**. At some (small) lakes, I counted more than five! In between all these redheads and scaups, we found only one male **Canvasback (31)** and only two males *Ring-necked Ducks*. In the reed and bushes surrounding the lakes, we saw a couple of **Red-winged Blackbirds (32)** and a male and female **White-crowned Sparrow (33)**. What a beauty! When we scanned this part of the lake for ducks, we almost missed the **American White Pelicans (34)** flying right above us. Around big lakes, this species is one of the commonest birds. Flying by was a flock of **Bonaparte's Gulls (35)**. While we further scanned (another) part of the lake, I saw my first **Buffleheads (36)**. During the trip, I saw quite a few, but always one or just a few birds. In total, we also found three *Common Loons* (two in breeding plumage), a few *Red-breasted Mergansers* and some *Common Goldeneyes*.

Looking for sparrows we found numerous *Lincoln's Sparrow*, *Savannah Sparrows*, *Harris's Sparrows* and *Field Sparrows*, but not what we were really looking for: American Tree Sparrow. This sparrow is - unlike other states - fairly common here in winter, but they were probably all gone by now. New sparrow however was **Song Sparrow (37)**. Driving along the lake, we saw more waterfowl, but no new species. Although we saw species of interest, like *Greater Scaup* - the only place to see them in Oklahoma. We also saw a *Short-eared Owl* flying, chased away by an *American Crow*.

Near the big factory, I saw my first **Belted Kingfisher (38)**. Unlike our kingfisher in the Netherlands, which likes fast streams, this species likes open water like Sooner Lake. Under the same bridge where the kingfisher landed there where many nests of Cliff Swallows (38) and just a minutes later a huge flock of probably over a fifty **Cliff Swallows (39)** kind of 'arrived'. Scanning the lake for the last time, I noticed **Common Canada Geese (40)**. Where probably used water entered into the lake, there were a lot *American White Pelicans* waiting for some food. They were not shy at all and I was able to get within 10 meters!



American White Pelican

We leaved Sooner Lake to look for **Le Conte's** and **Grasshopper Sparrows (41, 42)**, which we saw both shortly in a nature management area nearby. The technique to find these species is easy: just walk through long grass and now what to look for when you flush a bird. Near marshes most of the time it is Le Conte's, in drier habitat it is often Grasshopper Sparrow. We had at least two Le Conte's and one Grasshopper for sure in just 10 minutes or so.

Driving to a good spot for Smith's Longspur, just south of Sooner Lake, we saw two Horned Larks flying over the road. This species is very (!) common when heading towards the west part of the state. At the spot for Smith's Longspur, we did not find any longspurs, but did find at least four **Sprague's Pipits (43)**. Most birders think this is a hard bird to get, but if you are at the right place at the right time, it is not even that hard to find this much-wanted species. They are very secretive, but when you flush them, they make a noise that is reminiscent of the call of Richard's Pipit. Second new species while looking for Smith's was a flying by **Tree Swallow (44)**!

We checked the area around which resulted in my first **Bald Eagle (45)**: an adult, first sitting along the shore, but soon circling right above us! A beautiful adult showed himself very well! In a flock of sparrows, we saw at least one *Vesper Sparrow*, but not the wanted American Tree Sparrow. Driving back home, we saw again tons of so-called trash birds like Turkey Vultures.

In the afternoon, I walked around close to the house. This resulted in beautiful views of Bewick's Wren and a new species: a male of the dull form of **White-throated Sparrow (46)**, in the middle of a suburb! Although I already told that Bewick's Wren is hard to get in every state, this holds not true for Oklahoma: I saw them at several locations and especially further to the west (panhandle of Oklahoma) they are quite common. Finally, I saw again the *Coopers Hawk*, perching very close in a tree and this time I did not forget my camera!



Coopers Hawk

March 26th

This day I did not do much, also because Paul was busy with school. In the afternoon, we went together to Sanborn Lake Park. He waited in the car studying; I started to look for maybe the most common species I missed in those two days earlier: **Carolina Chickadee (47)**. I found the chickadee almost at the end of the route. Of course and like always, I started seeing them almost everywhere I came after this first sighting. I did not see any more special birds around or at the pond: *Northern Cardinals*, *White-crowned Sparrow*, *Field Sparrow*, *Downy Woodpecker*, *Blue Jay*, *Dark-eyed Junco*, *American Crow* and *Carolina Wren* were around the pond, *Pied-bellied Grebe* and *Common Canada Goose* were in the pond. Flying by were *Red-tailed Hawk* and – off course – *Turkey Vulture*.



Part of the Sanborn Lake Park

March 27th

This day we watched birds in the eastern, more forested part of Oklahoma. In the morning, we drove to Keystone Lake Park. Birds of 'interest' were a mixed flock of *American Goldfinches*, *Purple Finches* and many *Chipping Sparrows* at the camping site close to the lake. At the lake were lots of *Bonaparte's Gulls*, *Ring-billed Gulls* and one *Forsters Tern* – second for me ever – flew by. Along the shore, there was an **American Herring Gull (48)** perching between lots of Ring-billed Gulls. Also nice was the first of season Scissor-tailed Flycatcher I discovered. I already saw this species in Mexico, but what a beautiful bird that is! Also new for my 'Oklahoma'-list was a calling Blue-grey Gnatcatcher in the forest surrounding the bigger lakes of this national wild life refuge. On a parking there were some **Fish Crows (49)** calling. They proved too be quite shy, because we could not come close to the birds. One flew over very close, so that I could even see the flight characteristics like the rounded head, long tail and the pointed, swept-back wingtips!



American Herring Gull



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher

The afternoon we visited the Oxley Nature Reserve in Tulsa, which is the second biggest city of Oklahoma after Oklahoma City. First, we checked out a lake nearby which resulted in an adult summer *Common Loon*, the fourth for the trip after the three we saw at Sooner Lake earlier. Then we headed towards the reserve. Several walks through the reserve resulted in a nice bird list, which included most of the woodpeckers and several warblers. We heard a singing *Black-and-white-warbler*, several *Northern Parula's* and a new warbler species for me: **Yellow-throated Warbler (50)**. We tried to see them, but that did not worked out. Off course, we had also plenty of Myrtle Warblers. Man, that warbler is common. They are everywhere you can imagine!

Not a warbler, but a new species for me was an **Eastern Towhee (51)**, which was close to the information centre they were building. It was hopping around a whole bunch of cut-off branches together with many *Harris' Sparrows*. There were a lot of these bunches of branches because last winter they have had a ice storm which now resulted in hardly accessible reserves and many obvious damaged trees.



Damaged trees in Oxley Nature Reserve

As I said, we had a nice bird list, which included most of the woodpeckers like Downy and Hairy Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Flicker and the magnificent **Redheaded Woodpecker (52)**. We almost missed this target of the day, but after a tip of two older women who were also birdwatchers, we saw a few of these woodpeckers along a path called 'woodpecker'. First two of them were quite far, but later on one was drumming very close to the path so that I was able to make pictures of this stunning woodpecker. In the meantime a calling **Red-shouldered Hawk (53)** flew over at short distance! Close to this last woodpecker was another new species: **White-breasted Nuthatch (54)**, which showed itself very well so that I could even tell it was of the eastern subspecies.



Redheaded Woodpecker

After this last new species, we left the reserve and drove back homewards. In the afternoon I birded the running track which resulted in my first sighting of perching Cedar's, a Song Sparrow which showed itself very well, a flying by **Purple Martin (55)** and a flying **Sharp-shinned Hawk (56)** way in the distance. In the late afternoon/evening, Paul and I went to Lake Carl Blackwell to look for Pine Warbler, Great-Horned & Barred Owl and Wild Turkey. I could not find any of these species, but I did a new species: a flock of at least 20 **Northern Bobwhites (57)** which I flushed in the forest. It was hard to see them on the ground, but finally I saw some walking just in front of me. Other interesting birds were two *Orange-crowned Warblers* in a flock of Myrtles. This was the first time I experienced that pishing does work! At first, the flock did not show itself very well, but after some pishing, some came immediately out of the dense tree sitting way in the open! Finally yet importantly, a *Spotted Towhee* was present, my first for the state.

#### March 28th

Today we visited the Tail grass Prairie Reserve, a two-hour drive from Stillwater to the north. Target of today was off course **Greater Prairie Chicken (58)**. We went together with a teacher of Paul (Dwayne Elmore: [Dwayne.elmore@okstate.edu](mailto:Dwayne.elmore@okstate.edu)) that did some research on these birds so he knew where to look for them. After a while, we were looking at a group of nine lekking birds just outside the reserve! Although the distance was probably over 200 meters, we still could see them quite well in the telescope. We tried to come closer, but only saw two birds sitting nearby shortly. For those who are planning to visit Oklahoma for birdwatching: I have directions for this bird, so please feel free to send me an email.



Typical habitat of Greater Prairie Chicken: burned fields to lek and tall grass to breed in



Second new bird of the day, just a few hundred meters before entering the reserve (entrance with information centre), was **Louisiana Waterthrush (59)**. The bird was singing near a stream, where it showed itself very well and what a bird that is: a big fat 'new world warbler' with a stubby tail, continuously pumping with his whole body. A combination between thrush (song), dipper (shape) and wagtail (behaviour)! Along this stream, I also saw my second *Fox Sparrow*, a *Spotted Towhee* and a *Redheaded Woodpecker*! After we visited the stream we went to look for Henslow's Sparrow, but it was probably too early for this. During the search for Henslow's we did see however two more *Grasshopper Sparrows* and again *Le Conte's Sparrow*, all only in flight (off course). Heading back home, we stopped close to a big river near Cleveland where we saw lots of *Fish Crows*, *Purple Finches* and another new species for today: **Rusty Blackbirds (60)** – two birds first shortly seen in the top of a tree, after they flew while calling (almost diagnostic feature!).

#### March 31st

This day I met Robert Holbrook ([incatern@msn.com](mailto:incatern@msn.com)), a birder who has done birdwatching in all the states of The US and is currently living in one of the many suburbs of Oklahoma City. Together we would visit the next day one of the most famous nature reserves in Oklahoma: Red Slough. It is located in the extreme southeast of the state and has much to offer! However, it is still a several hours-drive from Oklahoma City to Broken Bow, the place where we would stay that night. We birded along the way (*2nd Belted Kingfisher*) and near Weewooke, I saw my first **Wild Turkey (61)**: those birds are big, especially the males! At a campsite, we saw a *Redheaded Woodpecker* and my first *Lark Sparrow* for the state. We headed towards Sequoia Wildlife Refuge where we saw few interesting birds: a Bald Eagle perching on his nest, a flock of over 50 *American Golden Plovers* together with 18 *Pectorals* and 3 *Least Sandpipers* in a field. On the same field there was also a *Horned Lark*, not as common here as in the west (see later). In a small forest, we saw a *Purple Finch* and above the nearby lake, there was a bunch of *Tree Swallows* foraging.



Sequoia Wildlife Refuge

At the end of the day, we arrived at Broken Bow and visited the famous City Park. The target was **Brown-headed Nuthatch (62)** and within no time, we had one – although it had just taken a bath in the pool and did not look that nice. Fortunately, later on we saw another one that showed itself well... and dry! It is a smaller and more compact nuthatch compared to the more common *White-breasted Nuthatch*, also seen in the park. Second new birds were two singing **Pine Warblers (63)** of which I saw one shortly sitting in the open. Also new was **Yellow-throated Vireo (64)**: a beauty! In the same park, I also saw my first *Yellow-throated Warblers* after the ones only heard in the Oxley Nature Centre in Tulsa. Again a beautiful warbler, especially when compared to the boring warblers we have in the Netherlands like Northern Chiffchaff or, even worse, Garden Warbler! Another bird only heard before was a well-showing *Pine Siskin*. Moreover, I even saw another new species in this small park and even a new statebird for Robert: a female **Golden-crowned Kinglet (65)**. Other birds I noticed were the many *Chipping Sparrows* and *Myrtle Warblers* in the park and a *Belted Kingfisher* near the pool. We went to Broken Bow and spent the night in Broken Bow Inn. That evening a search for owls resulted in my first Armageddon at Beavers Bend.

April 1st

In the early morning we met David Arbour ([arbour@windstream.net](mailto:arbour@windstream.net)), one of the managers of Red Slough. It was unfortunately a wet, cold and misty day. We met him at a parking lot where birding immediately started with my first **American Bittern (66)** flying low and at close distance over the reed bed, a calling **King Rail (67)** and two flying-by **Wood Ducks (68)**. The three of us stepped in David's car and drove to a tower nearby, where we could overlook part of the reserve. There we saw my first flying by **Hooded Mergansers (69)** and **Little Blue Herons (70)**, heard my first **Sora (71)** and **Common Yellowthroat (72)** and saw my second *Solitary Sandpiper* ever, after the first for the Netherlands in May 2006. I also had better views of (again) flying by Wood Ducks and we noticed a flock of (later) more than 60 *White Ibises*, one of the few species that only occurs in this part of the state of Oklahoma. Also interesting was a calling *American Bittern*, a sound completely different from their European counterpart. Of course, the area was full of all kinds of ducks (*Blue-winged*, *Green-winged Teals* etc) and other waterfowl. Last but definitely not least, we had a flying by (but close!) *Black-bellied Whistling Duck* – quite rare in Oklahoma!

We headed towards the second tower, but this resulted in almost no birds. In some bush in front of us, Robert noticed again a new bird for me, one that proved to be very common in the area: **Swamp Sparrow (73)**. We heard again a *King Rail*, but decided to move on. Soon David found a *Sora* sitting in the open! A great find and an even greater bird! We walked further and soon saw my first *Common Yellowthroat*. It showed itself very well, more than once. Thereafter, I saw my first **Marsh Wrens (74)**: first only heard, but soon I saw several singing – sometimes way in the open. Another new species for me was a singing **Prothonotary Warbler (75)**, which did not show itself well and only saw it flying by, not even at close distance. Walking back in a flock of sparrows David found a sneaky **Brown Thrasher (76)**, which I only saw shortly and in a flock of mostly Cliff Swallows, I saw an 'early' **Chimney Swift (77)** – the only one I saw during my stay!



The dike between the 'marshes'



The surrounding area

We passed the spot of King Rail again (half an hour later) and David asked if I would like to try to flush it. Of course! He handed me some boots and I started walking through the marshy area. Within a few minutes, the bird started calling again and I saw some movement in front of me. Soon I flushed the bird but it almost dropped down immediately close to David and Robert standing on the small dike our car was on. David decided to walk into it to flush it again so that I had better views. Within no time, he flushed the bird and the rail passed within a meter! I did not even need my binoculars! What a great bird that is!



Me trying to flush a King Rail

We went on and visited a marshy area more close to a forested area. There was again this tower to overlook the area. The area existed still of marshy reed beds, small trees/bushes and some small ponds. In one of this ponds were many trees, were I again saw a lifer: **Anhinga (78)**. I dipped on this species in Mexico, so it was a nice welcome! Red Slough is the only part of Oklahoma where these birds occur. I saw 6 birds in total: 5 males and 1 female. They were resting in the trees together with *Double-crested Cormorants*. In the same pond, I saw my second *Canvasback* of the trip. Also of interest where *Ruddy Ducks*: we counted a flock of 14 birds. After we counted all the other birds on these ponds and other birds, we headed towards a marshy area to try to flush a Virginia Rail and to listen for Sedge Wren. Within a quarter or so, I flushed a **Virginia Rail (79)** and shortly saw a **Sedge Wren (80)**: mission accomplished. Along the way, I saw my best Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers in flight at close distance with my binoculars. Wood Duck proved itself by flying straight into the forest.



A nice male Anhinga

After I showed David a list of my birds I needed we decided to look for some forest species. We played Eastern Screech Owl for several times and this resulted in two new species: **White-eyed Vireo (81)** and **Hermit Thrush (82)**. The first showed itself very well, the second one also but only for a split second. This taping normally attracts a whole bunch of other forest species, including *Ruby-crowned Kinglets*, *Blue-grey Gnatcatchers* and a second *Eastern Towhee* during my stay in Oklahoma. We were also able to get good views of *Pine Warbler* and *Yellow-throated Vireo*, both colourful birds. After we did some birdwatching in the forest, we moved on to look for other 'new' birds.

Back in the 'wetland', we scanned again the first spot. White Ibises were still there, but this time there were also **White-faced Ibises (83)**. This species is hard to distinguish from Glossy Ibises, mostly only by the red iris. I was able to identify at least two of the birds positive as White-faced, but they were probably all. Glossy Ibis is rare in Red Slough, so a flock of 16 would be extremely rare although the possibility of a mixed flock is not 100% excluded. Anyhow, there were at least 2 White-faced Ibises in their (first) winter plumage. Because at half past three you are not allowed to be in the area, we soon left the reserve. While we drove back, I noticed my last new species: **Wilson's Snipe (84)**. Two birds flew by at close distance so that I could see some of the small differences with Common Snipe. David knew a place for **Brewer's Blackbird (85)** and I soon was able to see this bird. Fortunately, I also saw a female, easily distinguished from Rusty by their dark eyes. Moreover, on the same field there was this beautiful male **Yellow-headed Blackbird (86)**! This quite rare bird in Oklahoma showed itself very well at close distance! Wow!

While birding with David he told us a place for what definitely is the rarest bird of my trip and even of the United States: **Red-cockaded Woodpecker (87)**! I already gave up the chance to see this bird, although I knew it had to be somewhere in Oklahoma according to their range map. David gave us very detailed information about this place and almost guaranteed us that we should see the birds when they come to their breeding grounds to spend the night. Interesting: these birds breed and rest in colonies! Anyway, after we had dinner in Broken Bow we drove to the undisclosed location in the Broken Bow Wildlife Management Area (just north of Mount Herman) to look for the woodpecker. We arrived on time, but the birds were not yet there. After we waited for probably 45 minutes - in which we only saw *Pine Warbler* - Robert saw one while I shortly took pictures of their nesting holes. I was able to identify the bird, but not any more...Fortunately within half an hour two birds arrived that showed themselves very well! They were noisy (strange sound!) and I was able to photograph one of the birds. While I was taking pictures, Robert noticed **Pileated Woodpecker (88)** flying overhead and landing nearby. We search for the bird and relocated the bird within 10 minutes. We saw one sticking his head out of a hole in the trunk of a tree and saw one flying by. Great to finally see this bird, after I missed it for several times at potential good locations.



Nesting hole of Red-cockaded Woodpecker



Red-cockaded Woodpecker!

#### April 4th

This day Paul and I drove from Stillwater to Woodward to join the 'excursion' the next morning to see Lesser Prairie-Chicken. Along the way, we birded and saw several 'good' birds like my second Wild Turkey and new ducks like Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon, Mallard and Gadwall. I even saw a new bird species: **Swainson's Hawk (89)**. The more you go west, the commoner they are. I saw my first one near the place of Cheyenne but after the first, I saw plenty. They are easy to identify by their contrasting pattern (white belly and coverts, dark remiges and head) that reminded me of Booted Eagle, a species I saw in the Pyrenees on the border between France and Spain. After this first Swainson's we soon heard a *Rock Wren* singing at the top of a mesa, my first for Oklahoma. Soon after this Rock Wren, we arrived at Selman Ranch where Sue Selman waited for us. It was late in the afternoon so she asked us to help setting up the tents we would sit in and watch (hopefully) the Lesser Prairie-Chickens the next morning. We helped here, together with Dwayne Almore, the birding teacher of Oklahoma State University in Stillwater. Setting up the tents already resulted in a new species: a singing **Western Meadowlark (90)**. After finishing setting up the tents, we had still some time left and decided to go out birding the area. After a *Vesper Sparrow* sitting on a wire along the road, especially the salt lake nearby proved to be very good birding with lots of *Semipalmated*, *Baird's* and *Least Sandpipers*. There were also approximately 10 *Lesser* and 5 *Greater Yellowlegs* foraging. In addition, we saw many *Snowy Plovers*, looking different from their European counterpart: Kentish Plover. Good bird here but common along the coast of my home country the Netherlands, was a *Black-bellied Plover*.



The salt lake



Snowy Plover

Close to the lake, we saw another good bird and new this time: **Say's Phoebe (91)**, at his outermost eastern range of occurrence. This species occurs, like other species, only in the (western) panhandle of Oklahoma. Driving back, we heard several *Grasshopper Sparrows* singing and I even managed to 'see' two new species: a **Great Horned Owl (92)** and **Common Poorwill (93)**. The owl was flying a few hundred meters in front of the car but I could not see any features besides it was huge owl (fortunately, I saw more during the rest of my stay) and the poorwill was sitting on the asphalt road we drove at. It flew off almost immediately and unfortunately, we were not able to relocate the bird.

April 5th

The next morning we stood up early to be at the spot before the chickens arrived. Together with four others, I was in on of the two tents and the waiting began. Soon the **Lesser Prairie-Chickens (94)** arrived and we sat there for several hours watching them! They were at close distance, most of the time there were always a few within 25 meters. We counted at least 9 males and 4 females. The males were almost constantly lacking, especially when one of the females showed up. This lekking is very spectacular and we all enjoyed being there with them. Also spectacular were the flying by *Northern Harrier* and *Coopers Hawk*, of which the last one even tried to catch one of the birds! It really was an experience to be there and hereby I again want to thanks Sue Selman for her hospitality!



A male Lesser Prairie-Chicken



A lekking male LPC

After having breakfast/lunch –while watching Pine Siskins, Harris’s Sparrow and Red-winged Blackbirds at their feeder – at Sue Selmans range, we moved on further to the west. Soon *Horned Lark* became, together with *Western Meadowlark*, the most common bird. These birds are of another subspecies we have in the Netherlands (and other parts of North America): they are paler, the yellow as well as the brown (which is more grayish-brown). In addition, we started seeing more *Say’s Phoebes* and (again) *Swainson’s Hawks*. While driving, Paul noticed two curlews flying over and they turned out to be **Long-billed Curlews (95)** Another flying by new species and (like the curlews) typical of this short-grass prairie landscape were the (also) two **Chihuahuan Ravens (96)**. We saw plenty of both species as we drove on through the panhandle.

During the breakfast/lunch, a known birdwatcher tipped us about Sunset Lake, a park in the city of Guymon. We decided to give a go and it proved to be good birding! Within no time, we saw a male and female **Cassin’s Finches (97)**, a **Townsend’s Solitaire (98)** and **Mountain Chickadee (99)**. After the chickens, a good start of this ‘panhandle-weekend’! We headed towards Boise city to look for maybe even the target of the trip to the panhandle: Mountain Plover. Especially the area northeast of Boise City is famous. They like recently ploughed fields so we checked all these fields, but the first hours with no luck. We only found 7 *Long-billed Curlews* on these fields and at the sewage of Boise city we found *Cinnamon Teal* and *American Avocet* – two species I had already seen in Mexico, but the American Avocet only way in the distance in the blazing heath...so I was very pleased to see this bird again! After having ‘dinner’ at Subway, we decided to search for them one more time. With luck this time: we soon found a flock of 8 **Mountain Plovers (100)** on (of course) a ploughed field just 4 miles north-north-east of Boise City, just east of the 287/3/385. I tried to make pictures but they are quite shy, but what a smoothly tinged plover that is!



Long-billed Curlew



Mountain Plovers

After this, we drove further to the west where we birded around a nature campsite close to the border with New Mexico. This resulted in a species we dipped on in Mexico: **Ladder-backed Woodpecker (101)**, a nice male showing itself very well at the camping site. On this same camping site, there was also this huge flock of only White-crowned Sparrows. Almost at dark, we saw my ninth new species of the day: a **Canyon Towhee (102)** together with a Rufous-crowned Sparrow – a new one for Oklahoma (for me of course). Both last new species proved to be very common birding the mesas the next day. At night, we shortly heard a **Western Screech-Owl (103)** – and 10th of the day – calling close to the campsite and we heard several Coyotes making wolf-like noises.

#### April 6th

We started birding very early this day and soon I saw my first new species of that day: **Black-billed Magpie (104)**. They look the same as their European counterpart, but have much higher calls. We decided to start birding along the road to Colorado and then 'back' to the east. The road to Colorado was a bit disappointing after the stories we heard about Pinyon Jay and Western Scrubjays seen along this road in September by a fellow birder and his wife we met during the LPC-excursion. This was also our only chance to see Lewis's Woodpecker, Western Bluebird, Juniper Titmouse and (if lucky) Clarks Nutcracker. We saw none of these species. Maybe it was already too late for some of these, but others should be around. We were not as lucky as yesterday...although we saw some interesting species along the way as *Bushtits* and *Mountain Chickadees*. Paul saw another *Townsend's Solitaire* I missed birding somewhere else. *Ladder-backed Woodpeckers* were common all over the place, even in flocks of a few birds. Interestingly they often forage in the outer branches of very small trees (conifers in the panhandle) of which you sometimes wonder if these held these birds...Common were also *Bewicks Wrens*: they were literally everywhere! A perching nearby *Sharp-shinned Hawk* needs also some attention, after the one I saw flying way in the distance in Stillwater...



Habitat of Bushtits and Mountain Chickadees



Bed & Breakfast along the road

After we tried to find Lewis's Woodpecker which (of course) did not work out well – but saw a nice *Great Horned Owl*, a whole bunch of *Wild Turkeys* and a few **Sage Thrashers (105)** – we decided to go and look for Burrowing Owl and Lark Bunting in the Black Mesa park. Finding **Burrowing Owl (106)** is checking what they call Prairiedog-towns. These owls live in these 'towns'. I soon found one, which Paul missed. Fortunately, after a few minutes the bird showed up again and showed itself quite well. They disappear as quickly as they appear! In these same 'town', I saw my first **Lark Buntings (107)**, unfortunately no adult male in breeding plumage yet. We could not find other targets like Black-throated and Cassin's Sparrow, but it probably was too early to be already there. Because it was already late in the afternoon, we decided to go home. On the way back, we again looked for a quite common species I kept on missing during my stay: Greater Roadrunner. Again, we dipped on this bird. On our way back, we also visited an almost dried up lake in the panhandle where it should be possible to see or hear Virginia Rail. We tried (taping) and within no time we were looking at a *Virginia Rail* that came out of the reed bed to look what was going on and where these other male was. This bird showed itself much better than the bird I flushed down under in Red Slough!

#### April 9th

On this day, I met Matthew Jung ([mpjung5125@yahoo.com](mailto:mpjung5125@yahoo.com)) and his lovely wife, one of the two birders I already contacted when I prepared my trip in The Netherlands. We planned a trip to the southwest of Oklahoma to look for Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Verdins and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers. I already saw plenty of this last species, so there were two main targets left. During my stay, I missed a few more species so off course we had more targets like Chestnut-collared Longspur, a species that occurs in winter in the Wichita Mountain National Wildlife Refuge. Therefore, still there was a lot to see.

We started this day by driving from Oklahoma City to another big city in Oklahoma called Lawton. There we met another birder, Kurt Meisenzahl ([meisenzk@sbcglobal.net](mailto:meisenzk@sbcglobal.net)). In his garden, he had this feeder for hummingbirds and regularly **Black-chinned Hummingbirds (108)** visited it. Within an hour, we had seen at least 2 different females and males. They showed themselves very well, but often not that long while hovering in front of the feeder. Although these birds are flying most of the time, I was able to make a picture of as well the female as the male! In that same garden, it was good birding with also: 2 *Lincolns Sparrows*, 10-15 *Cedar Waxwings* shortly present, a *Red-breasted Nuthatch* on another feeder, 2 female *Pine Siskins*, 2 *Orange-crowned Warblers* and a *Chipping Sparrow*. On that same feeder from May until July 1998, a *Green Violet-ear* (second for Oklahoma and still a mega for the United States) visited their feeder and attracted birders from all over the country!



Female Black-chinned Hummingbird



Male Black-chinned Hummingbird

After watching them for over an hour, we were satisfied and together with Kurt – who decided to join us on both days (!) – we drove to the Wichita Mountains to look for Chestnut-collared Longspurs. During my stay until then I was not be able to see one of the four longspurs. According to the website of the Tulsa Audubon Society, they should be still around until the first days of April. In these mountains, we found just one **Chestnut-collared Longspur (109)**. Unfortunately, it was not a full adult male in breeding plumage, but one moulting from winter to summer (partly black underparts). We also saw my only second *Red-shouldered Hawk* of the trip. Back to the occurrence of the longspurs in this time of the year: maybe this year they left earlier, but from what I heard early April is overestimated. When you are not able to find them, they are probably gone already because usually they are common, easy to flush and they all have a very distinctive flight call. Therefore, I was maybe very lucky to see still one instead of being disappointing about seeing just one. After these mountains, we headed towards a reserve called Hackberry Flat. In the meantime, we stopped at some locations and this resulted in 6 *Semipalmated Sandpipers*, *American Pipit* and *Wilson's Snipe* near a very small pond 'somewhere' and near a farm we had good views on *Brewers Blackbirds* and *Common Grackles* together.

When birding Oklahoma you must have been to Hackberry Flat: it is good birding! We saw shit loads of sandpipers (semipalmated/ least), yellowlegs, teals (blue-winged/ green-winged), cormorants and pelicans. We also saw several *American Avocets* as well as *Black-necked Stilts*, both beautiful birds. Other interesting stilts were 4 *Solitary Sandpipers*, a *Snowy Plover*, a **Semipalmated Plover (110)**, 14 or 16 **upland Sandpipers (111)** flying by and **Willet (112)** – which is quite rare in Oklahoma. Interesting teals and ducks were the several hundreds of *Ruddy Ducks* down at the biggest lake of the reserve, 11 *Cinnamon Teals* (at least 9 males and 2 females – probably more) close to the visitor centre, at least 7 *Buffleheads* (3 pairs together and 1 lonely male), 4 *American Wigeons* (2 pairs) and an adult summer *Eared Grebe*. Interesting egrets, herons etc were 2 *Snowy Egrets*, a *Little Blue Heron*, my first *Black-crowned Night-Heron* of the trip and 3 *White-faced Ibises*. Other interesting birds were a *Clay-colored Sparrow* – my first for Oklahoma, a well-showing *Marsh Wren*, a *Yellow-headed Blackbird* in a flock of blackbirds flying by and a *King Rail* that showed itself very well after we played this sucker in!

After this, we decided to look for Smiths Longspur close to Fredericks Airport although it was probably already gone by now. On the way to this airport, we noticed an old farm that could easily held some *Great Horned Owls*. We stopped and with a minute two of these enormous owls flew off. They showed themselves extremely well, but unfortunately too short to make pictures of them – probably also because I just packed in when we left Hackberry Flat. One was perching on a high pole within 50 meters (probably less) against a blue sky...still frustrating. Nearby we saw some *Lark Buntings*. Searching longspurs, we flushed another *Sprague's Pipit*, after the four I had seen on the third day around Sooner Lake in Oklahoma.



American Avocet



King Rail - no telescope, just 6 x optical zoom!

#### April 9th

This day we would go out to look for Verdins in the extreme southwest of Oklahoma, near a place called Eldorado. The first stop immediately resulted in a new species: **Black-crested Titmouse (113)**. We heard two singing and shortly saw one. Another bird of interest, new for my Oklahoma-list and surprisingly common in this part of the state was *Golden-fronted Woodpecker* of which I saw several in Mexico already. At the first stop (of three possibilities), it started raining a bit but we kept on searching Verdins. We did not find any and raining started to get worse. So worse, we decided to stop birding. Not only because it was horrible, but also because most roads were of red clay where cars easily stuck when wet. We then headed back to Lawton where I was - despite the heavy raining - was able to see a new species: **Ross' Goose (114)** - a bird with wing damage in a city park at the edge of Lawton. After this lifer (although countable in The Netherlands), we drove via Oklahoma City to Stillwater where we arrived in the late afternoon.

#### April 10th

On this last day for me in Oklahoma, I of course was still eager to see new species. Because the night before it rained heavy for hours, there was not much choice left. Some good spots for Greater Roadrunner and Sandhill Crane were no longer accessible, so we choose to go out and look for Marbled Godwits near Bixby (seen there the day before). We first drove around in Stillwater to see the damage the rain had caused that night. Besides flooded roads and cars, we found a tremendous flock of *Franklin's Gulls* - in full breeding plumage! Although it is still a gull: what a great one to see! After I had taken some pictures of them, we decided to move on up to Bixby.

Because of the heavy rainy day before there were plenty of 'wetlands' in that area, so that we had a good chance of seeing them. We started to look for godwits in an agricultural area called Wagoner County Sod Farms. After a while we noticed some birds way in the distance which I immediately identified as being godwits. Because they were quite far away, we decided to cross some private property to get closer looks. Soon we realized they were not Marbled Godwits, but - even more rare - a flock of 19 **Hudsonian Godwits (115)**! After taking some pictures of these birds, we decided to go and look for Marbled Godwits in this area. We did not find any here, although we saw at least 200 *American Golden Plovers* and many *Bairds, Least, Semipalmated and Pectoral Sandpipers*. Moreover, we had good views of a perching *Upland Sandpiper*.

We headed back to Stillwater, but Paul realized there was another small 'wetland' south of Bixby called 'Tulsa Sod Farm'. Soon after we arrived, we saw a godwit perching close to the water edge. As we came closer, this bird proved to be a **Marbled Godwit (116)** - the bird we were looking for! The godwit showed itself as we came closer and closer up to 20-30 m. We noticed it was bigger than Hudsonian, saw the diagnostic wing pattern and heard it calling. Unfortunately, the battery of my camera was low, so I was not able to take good pictures. There were almost no other birds around, although we noticed 8 (probably) White-faced Ibises flying overhead.





Part of the group of 19 Hudsonian Godwits



Franklin's Gull

We drove back home, had dinner with our good old friends and drove to Sanborn Lake Park to try for **Barred Owl (117)**. Paul tried to get this sucker in by imitating his song. Within just a split second, one bird flew in and perched for a while on a branch. We did not bring our binoculars (and my glasses), but still were both able to see the bird quite ok. By their size, shape and underparts you could at least tell it was Barred Owl. After this bird, we went home and to bed. The next day I flew back into the Netherlands.

Thanks!

First, I really want to thank Paul van Els ([paulvanelis@yahoo.com](mailto:paulvanelis@yahoo.com)): without him, this whole trip would not even be possible! I stayed free at his house in Stillwater and we did a lot of birdwatching in Oklahoma! Except for those four days I birded with other American birders, all the other trips I made were thanks to him! In those three weeks, he managed to combine studying and showing me the bird of Oklahoma! Many thanks! Also thanks to all those other birders that showed me around in Oklahoma: David Arbour, Robert Holbrook, Kurt Meisenzahl, Dwayne Elmore and Matthew Jung! And for all the information about where to find which birds in Oklahoma! Then I also have to thank Jimmy Woodard who was not able (or not when I was) to show me around, but gave so much information about most-wanted species. Finally thanks to their lovely wives for their hospitality and my friends Vince & Jason for their company during my stay in Oklahoma – and of course (their finds) in Mexico!

