

# ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK IN NORTH CAROLINA

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The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is a vast area encompassing the higher mountains of the ridge that forms the state line between North Carolina and Tennessee. Over half of the approximately 800 square miles in the park lie in North Carolina. The region has been of great interest to ornithologists and other biologists since early times because of the great variety of habitats that are to be found within relatively short distances of each other. For a review of the general natural history of the area, the reader is referred to *Great Smoky Mountains Natural History Handbook* (Stupka, 1960).

Currently the authoritative reference work on the birds of the park is Arthur Stupka's *Notes on the Birds of Great Smoky Mountains National Park* (1963). The author of that work served with distinction for many years as Chief Naturalist of the park. The book summarizes all the data available prior to its publication, and it gives a historical review of ornithological work in the region. More recently, a field check-list ("Birds of the Great Smoky Mountains") was prepared by Seasonal Ranger-Naturalist Fred J. Alsop III and published by the park in 1968. The check-list indicates the status of each species by use of abbreviated notation. Both of these publications are excellent, and they are accurate to the extent that anything about a changeable subject such as wildlife can be. There are, however, many gaps in the information presented in them, especially with regard to the bird life of the North Carolina portion of the park. Both Stupka and Alsop compiled most of their data in Tennessee, as is understandable since the Park Headquarters is in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and Alsop's duties placed him primarily in Cades Cove, also in that state.

During the summers of 1969 and 1970, I was privileged to work as a Seasonal Ranger-Naturalist in the Great Smoky Mountains. My residence was in the Oconaluftee area near Cherokee, N.C., and my duties familiarized me with the bird life of a section of the park that had previously been somewhat neglected ornithologically. I made many observations during this time that were at variance with the published information about the park.

Two areas deserve special mention. The Oconaluftee area itself is maintained in a pastoral state by the National Park Service in order to preserve the pioneer atmosphere of the valley. Consequently, it is similar in many respects to Cades Cove in Tennessee. Many of the birds found here are not typical of the heavily forested Smokies, but rather are those one would expect in the piedmont. Several lowland species have only recently invaded the Oconaluftee area. A similar situation prevails in the Cataloochee Valley, at the extreme eastern end of the park. This valley has been almost unexplored ornithologically. My studies there, though not extensive, did reveal the presence of several species hitherto unrecorded in the North Carolina portion of the park.

The following is a species by species account of the present status in the North Carolina portion of the park of those species whose status either has changed or has not been published previously.

## GREEN HERON, *Butorides virescens*

Stupka (1963) regards this bird as ". . . an uncommon migrant and a rare breeder." Alsop lists the bird as to be expected only in Cades Cove, and all records cited by Stupka

are from Tennessee. I observed this species twice in 1970 along Raven Fork near the park boundary. One sighting was in June, the other in August. The Green Heron should be expected in suitable habitat on the North Carolina side of the park, at least as a visitor, perhaps as a nonbreeding summer resident. Proper habitat for nesting is, however, lacking.

#### COMMON EGRET, *Casmerodius albus*

On 10 July 1970 a Common Egret perched in the top of a sycamore tree in the National Park Service Quarters Area at Oconaluftee. The weather was damp and overcast. The record is the first for the species from the North Carolina side of the park. It should not be expected regularly.

#### TURKEY VULTURE, *Cathartes aura*

Although Stupka (1963) states that this species is found at low altitudes throughout the park, he cites no records from North Carolina. Alsop's list indicates that it is to be expected only in Cades Cove. My observations indicate that the Turkey Vulture is a common summer resident in the Oconaluftee area and the southern part of the Blue Ridge Parkway, including the Heintooga Road. A large "buzzard roost" exists on top of the hill behind the Oconaluftee Job Corps Conservation Center. Often during the summer as many as 30 Turkey Vultures can be seen soaring over the area. There is, however, no direct evidence of the birds' breeding in the area.

#### GOSHAWK, *Accipiter gentilis*

On 15 June 1970 I was conducting the organized bird walk sponsored by the National Park Service. Our party had reached Heintooga Overlook on Balsam Mountain by about 11:20 A.M. The sky was unusually bright and clear, there being less of the mist so characteristic of the Great Smoky Mountains than usual. While we were standing at the overlook, a large hawk flew into view from our right apparently from several hundred yards down the slope of Balsam Mountain. It flew strongly upward, not soaring, to our eye level at which time it was approximately 200 yards away from the observers. It then continued in the same direction and disappeared from view behind the ridge. The bird was observed in 7 X 35 binoculars for about 20 seconds in excellent light with the sun to our backs.

Several things about the bird were immediately apparent. It was as large as a Common Raven, dark steel gray above and almost white below, totally devoid of any hint of brown or rufous. In shape it was like a short-winged harrier, the tail appearing proportionately longer than that of a Cooper's Hawk. Another striking feature was a strongly contrasting black mark behind the eye, separate from the cap. I noted the last feature quite well, as I at first thought the bird might be a Peregrine Falcon, which has occurred in the park previously. The black mark was, however, different from that of a Peregrine Falcon, and the bird's general shape showed that it was not a falcon but an accipiter. The next possibility was that the bird was a Cooper's Hawk, and this was suggested by some members of the party. To me, the bird was strikingly different from the Cooper's Hawk, which is an uncommon summer bird in the park. After considerable thought I am completely convinced that the bird in question was a Goshawk.

On 3 July 1970 while stopped at Alexander's View on the Heintooga-Round Bottom Road I saw a large accipiter soaring in the distance. The time was approximately 3:00 P.M. in clear sunny weather. The bird appeared to be dark gray above and all white below; however, the bird was a considerable distance away, and it was necessary to use binoculars to distinguish any color pattern. The locality of this observation is approximately 3 miles from Heintooga Overlook where the Goshawk was seen. I think

that there is a good possibility that this bird was also a Goshawk, possibly the same individual seen on 15 June.

According to Helmut C. Mueller (pers. com.), the Goshawk is extending its range in the southern Appalachians, but this extension has not been previously noted in North Carolina. These observations thus constitute the first record of the Goshawk in the Great Smoky Mountains, and the second sight record for the state. Mary Enloe saw one at Franklin, N.C., on 2 March 1969 (*Chat*, 34:79).

#### EASTERN KINGBIRD, *Tyrannus tyrannus*

This species has not been previously reported from the North Carolina side of the park. Stupka (1963) regards it as a transient and "... scarce summer resident." Of 80 records cited by him, only seven occurred during the breeding season (June-July). On 9 June and again on 23 June 1970, I saw Eastern Kingbirds in the Cataloochee Valley. Although few in number, the birds' presence is at least circumstantial evidence that they may nest there. Outside the Cataloochee area, this species must be regarded as only a transient, except in Cades Cove where the species is also found during June according to Alsop's check-list and my personal observations. During August of 1970, Eastern Kingbirds were fairly common in the Oconaluftee area, but they had not been previously observed there during the summer.

#### BARN SWALLOW, *Hirundo rustica*

I discovered the first nesting of the Barn Swallow in the North Carolina portion of the park in 1969 (Pratt, 1970). The species is now abundant in the Oconaluftee area during June and July but apparently leaves the area in early August.

#### RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD, *Agelaius phoeniceus*

This species apparently nests fairly commonly along the watercourses in the Cataloochee Valley. Both adults and young were present during June of 1970. As many as 30 individuals may have been there, making this a larger colony than the one in Cades Cove (Stupka, 1963). Red-winged Blackbirds also are seen in the Oconaluftee area in early June when the hayfields are being mowed, but there is no evidence that they nest there.

#### BALTIMORE ORIOLE, *Icterus galbula*

Stupka (1963) regards this species as only a transient. He may, indeed, be correct, but there is a possibility that the Baltimore Oriole may breed sparingly in the park. A singing adult male was noted at Smokemont on 20 and 21 July 1970. The species has also been reported from the Oconaluftee meadows during early June. Both of these areas are at low elevations.

#### BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD, *Molothrus ater*

The Brown-headed Cowbird is more common in early summer in the Oconaluftee area than Stupka's book would indicate. It is a frequently seen species in June during the mowing of the hayfields. In addition, this species seems to occur more commonly at high altitudes on the North Carolina side of the park than elsewhere. Cowbirds were frequently seen during June of 1970 at Black Camp Gap (4,522 feet) and at various altitudes along the Blue Ridge Parkway from Oconaluftee to Heintooga.

ROSE-BREADED GROSBEEK, *Pheucticus ludovicianus*

Stupka (1963) states that the lowest limit of the breeding range of this species is approximately 2,950 feet, and that low-altitude summer records represent visitors from higher elevations. However, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were observed frequently in the Oconaluftee area along Big Cove Road (2,100 feet) from 29 June through July 1970. These observations included family groups with many young birds not yet in full plumage. While this suggests the possibility of nesting in the vicinity, no nest was found.

RED CROSSBILL, *Loxia curvirostra*

Although this species is recognized as occurring in most areas that contain Canadian Zone forest in the Southern Appalachians, there have been no published records of it in the Balsam Range. During July and August of 1970 I saw Red Crossbills at several localities in the Balsams. These included Wolf Laurel Gap, the Heintooga area, and a locality between Heintooga and Paul's Gap. All of these are at high altitudes (over 5,000 feet) and contain growths of red spruce (*Picea rubens*) and Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*.)

LITERATURE CITED

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