

General Field Notes

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Warm Winter Weather Prompts Early Nesting Attempts in the Piedmont of North Carolina

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Throughout most of the month of December 1991 and early January 1992 male American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) were observed singing in the center of the campus of the UNCG at Greensboro. Their large size and dark color suggested that these were wintering robins of the northern race *T. m. migratorius*, not the resident breeding race *T. m. achrusterus*. Because no specimens were collected and no measurements made, we are unable to make any definitive statements about subspecific status. Although robins are frequently reported on the Audubon Christmas Bird Count from this location, it is not usual to hear them singing.

On 21 January 1992 Spencer observed an apparent female robin sitting on a nest in the middle of the UNCG campus. The nest was located 1.6 m above the ground at the top of the trunk of a grafted Japanese Pink Weeping Cherry tree (*Prunus subhirtella pendula*) on the E. side of College Avenue in front of the University Faculty Center. The nest was relatively conspicuous as the tree was without leaves. The bird continued to sit on the nest, and on 25 January Hendrickson confirmed that it contained three eggs. When Spencer again checked the nest on 27 January no incubating bird was evident; but there were three newly hatched young. Assuming an incubation period of 11 to 14 days

(Tyler 1949), this would place the time of laying for the first egg somewhere around 13 January.

Between 27 January and 3 February we observed the female either brooding the young or feeding them. On 4 February, Hendrickson found the adults had abandoned the nest, leaving three dead young. We suspect that the cold weather of early February (low temperatures of 29, 21 and 30°F were recorded on the first three days) forced the adults to spend maximum time brooding the young to maintain their body temperature and simultaneously minimized the availability of high-protein food in the form of invertebrates needed to sustain growth of the young. In brief, the young probably died of malnutrition. We observed an abundant supply of various kinds of fruits to meet the food requirements of the adult birds.

We continued to hear male robins singing on campus into late February, and saw large flocks of presumably non-breeding birds feeding on the abundant fruits.

Robins usually lay the first of their two or three clutches in the central Piedmont of North Carolina in early April (Potter et al. 1980; Pearson et al. 1942; pers. obs.). Tyler (1949) reported them laying eggs in late March or early April in various other parts of their range. Harrison (1975) reported two instances of winter breeding: a nest with eggs in January 1965 at Ellwood City, Pennsylvania and one with young in December 1965 from Columbus, Ohio. Neither nest was successful. Clearly, the pair in Greensboro were significantly ahead of the normal schedule.

On 17 February 1992 William (Bill) Craft reported finding two active nests of Mourning Doves (*Zenaida macroura*) while attempting to collect fruits of Chinese Windmill Palms (*Trachycarpus fortunei*).

The first nest, located on the S side of the First Presbyterian Church, 617 N. Elm Street, was found at a height of about 2.33 meters and contained two well-feathered young. As the incubation period for this species is approximately fifteen days (Tyler 1932) this would suggest the time of laying was at least 30 January. The second nest, located on the W side of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, 607 N. Greene Street, was found at a height of 2.9 meters and contained two eggs. Hendrickson visited both nests on 18 Feb. (high temperature was 47°F with drizzle) and found both nests with sitting adults.

On 20 February John Schoonover (pers. comm.) reported finding half an eggshell on his driveway in Archdale. The size and color of the shell led him to identify it as a probable Mourning Dove egg. Assuming this was a shell from a recently hatched egg that had been removed by a parent, the time of laying was approximately 6 Feb.

Pearson et al. (1942), Quay (1951) and Potter et al. (1980) reported that the usual time for laying the first clutch by Mourning Doves is mid- to late March. Quay (1951) reported the earliest egg record as 8 March in Garner, and Murray Allen reported a nest with two eggs 5 mi. S of Raleigh on 7 March 1955 (Chat 19:71), but Bailey (1969) reported one from Durham laid between 9 and 12 February. Tyler (1932) reported egg dates in Florida as early as 11 March and in Texas as early as 20 February. In South Carolina, Sprunt & Chamberlain (1949) reported the earliest record of nesting from Bishopville 10 February 1949. Equally unusual was a nest with two eggs reported by Ted Beckett from Charleston County, SC during the last week of Dec 1946 (Sprunt

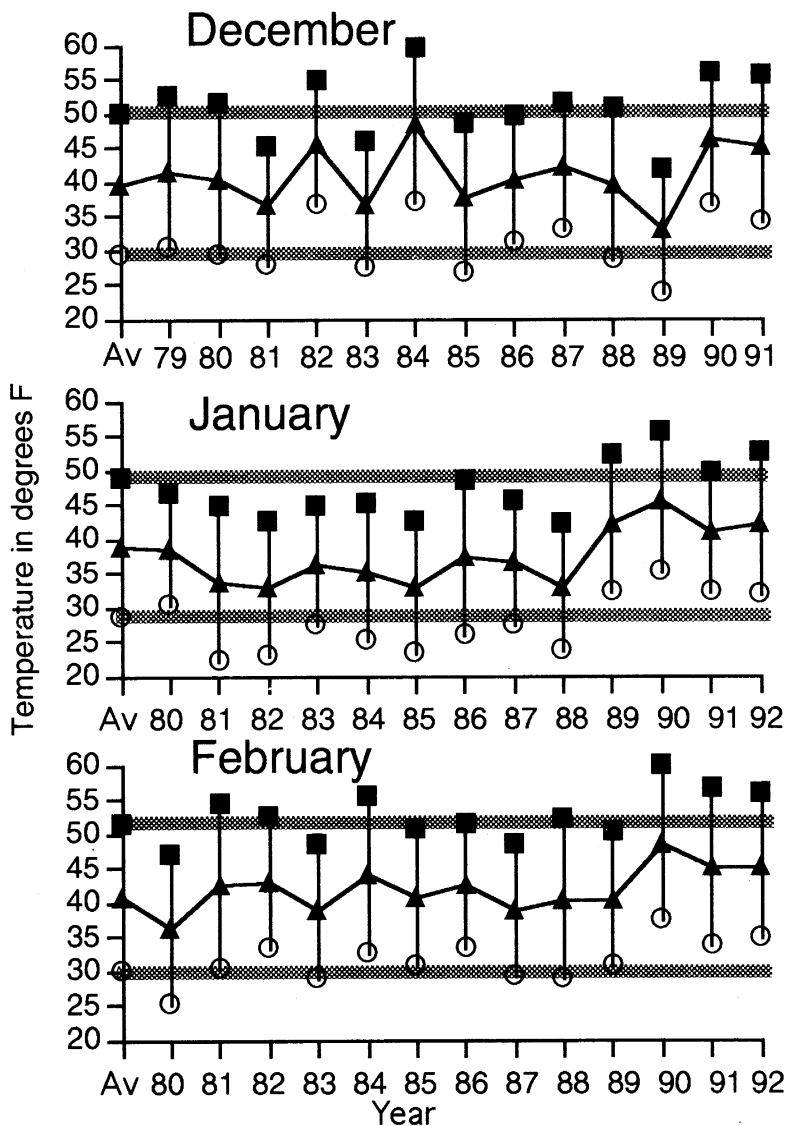


Fig. 1. Mean temperatures in °F for December, January and February from 1979-80 through 1991-92. Solid squares show mean daily high temperatures, solid triangles show mean daily average temperatures, open circles show mean daily low temperatures. The temperatures on the vertical axis labeled Av have been extended across each chart to show mean daily high and low temperatures for the period 1941-1970. Data from annual reports of the National Weather Service.

& Chamberlain 1949). In Virginia, M.D. Hart once found eggs at Ashland in mid-February (Murray 1952). The three nestings reported here are also significantly early for this geographic area.

A pair of Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) built a nest and commenced laying eggs on 16 Feb behind the home of John and Sharon Egan (pers. comm.) in southern Guilford County. By 20 February there were six eggs in the nest. A pair of Mallards nested at this same locality last year and their eggs hatched on 31 Mar 1991. The incubation period of Mallards is usually 26 days (Bent 1925, Kortright 1943) and begins with the last egg. A clutch size of ten to twelve, with one egg laid per day, would put the onset of laying at approximately 21 Feb. The Egan's stressed that these are not "pet ducks" although their history *vis a vis* domestication and/or captivity is unknown.

We had the subjective feeling that this was a relatively mild winter. An examination of the local climatological data from the National Weather Service Station at the Greensboro-Winston-Salem-High Point (Piedmont Triad International) Airport (Fig. 1) confirmed our suspicions. We have plotted the mean daily high, average and low temperatures for December, January and February from the winter of '79-80 to the present. The thirty-year average figures for the period 1941-1970 are extended across each graph as a pair of horizontal bars signifying highs and lows. It is noteworthy that the last two winters have been warmer than the average and the last four Januarys have been warmer than average. The warm Januarys are particularly apparent as the preceding eight Januarys all appear to have been colder than average.

We believe that these observations are important in demonstrating the flexibility inherent in many populations with respect to the onset of reproduction. While most individuals in a population may breed within a fairly limited time period, it is possible to find some that differ from the norm. It is these variants that have the potential for altering the future characteristics of the species if and when environmental circumstances favor these unusual traits.

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Harris' Sparrow in Durham County, N. C.

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On 21 April 1991 the senior author was birding on the Durham, NC spring count along Brickhouse Road (SR 1630) just N of Falls Lake in northeastern Durham County. On that cool (temp. 45° F) and rainy morning, he observed an adult Harris' Sparrow (*Zonotrichia querula*), in a hedgerow among open fields at a wildlife management area. The bird was associating with White-throated Sparrows (*Z. albicollis*), a White-crowned Sparrow (*Z. leucophrys*), and Field Sparrows (*Spizella pusilla*). He watched the Harris' Sparrow for one minute at a distance of 15 feet with 10x binoculars.

Budnitz noted that the bird was an adult in breeding plumage. It was clearly larger than the White-throated Sparrows it was associating with, and it had a more erect posture. It had a black face (forehead, sides, and chin) surrounding a pink bill. The black extended down through the throat and ended in a tapering point on the breast. The bird also had a blackish cap, though this was harder to distinguish because it was wet and the feathers were blowing in the wind. The belly was light with some streaking on the sides. The longish tail appeared to be notched. The back was dark brown.

The Harris' Sparrow was observed by several dozen birders through 4 May. All seven members of the N.C. Bird Records Committee, including the junior author, saw the sparrow, and Richard Davis heard the sparrow singing.

This appears to be the sixth record for North Carolina. Olson (Chat 42:60-61) summarized the first four records, and a fifth record was also published in The Chat (45:84). The records now include two from the mountains, two from the western Piedmont, and two from the lower Piedmont. The previous records were grouped between November and March. This Durham County record is by far the latest sighting for North Carolina, with the most brightly-plumaged individual reported for the state. Most importantly, this appears to be the first Harris' Sparrow that was studied by a group of birders over an extended period of time.