

OCCASIONAL PAPERS OF THE MUSEUM OF  
ZOOLOGY

---

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS

---

SOME BIRDS OF THE RIO GRANDE DELTA  
OF TEXAS

BY JOSSELYN VAN TYNE

THE avifauna of the Brownsville region has attracted much attention among American ornithologists because of its great variety and its tropical affinities. In 1925-26 Ludlow Griscom and Maunsell S. Crosby issued a very useful list of the birds of the Brownsville region<sup>1</sup> but pointed out the incompleteness of our knowledge of the avifauna of the area.

In 1930 the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology was able, through the generosity of Mr. William G. Fargo, to send H. H. Kimball to Brownsville to collect in its interest.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Kimball's base was a camp near the left bank of the Rio Grande, fourteen and a half miles by road below Brownsville; most of his work seems to have been done in that vicinity.

Kimball's collection included two undescribed forms (of which one is here characterized) and a number of records which supplement the published information on the birds of the Brownsville region.

<sup>1</sup> *Auk*, 42: 432-440, 519-537; 43: 18-36.

<sup>2</sup> The Museum has also received as a gift from Leonard W. Wing and George S. Wing a collection made by them in the Brownsville region between December 23, 1926, and January 11, 1927.

Mr. Fargo spent April 19 to 22, 1930, with Mr. Kimball, and has kindly given me the following description of the country.

The delta of the Rio Grande on the American side below Brownsville is a rather flat plain with old dunes scattered about and other lower ridges rising but a few feet above the plain. The low ridges appear to have been formed by silt deposited on the banks of resacas, now dry at most stages of the river. In rainy seasons a large proportion of the delta is flooded.

Along the river is a dense "chaparral." These thickets are composed of various thorny shrubs, together with mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*), huisache (*Vachellia Farnesiana*), ebony (*Siderocarpus flexicaulis*), retama (*Parkinsonia aculeata*), and other Leguminosae, thus affording shelter and food for numerous species of birds. To the north of the river are salt or alkaline marshes and brackish ponds between the ridges and also many old resacas containing fresh water in the wet season. Many of the ridges and dunes are covered more or less with similar thickets and in some instances with trees. On the plains particularly, cacti (*Opuntia* sp.) and Spanish dagger (*Yucca treculeana*) are to be seen everywhere.

*Totanus flavipes* (Gmelin). Lesser Yellowlegs. An adult male collected June 19, 1930, marks by far the latest spring date recorded for this species in the Brownsville region.

*Pelidna alpina sakhalina* (Vieillot). Red-backed Sandpiper. The status of this sandpiper at Brownsville is uncertain, but this is the extreme southern limit of its winter range. A small series representing both sexes was collected May 10.

*Recurvirostra americana* Gmelin. Avocet. A few apparently breed in the region. Kimball took an adult female July 5.

*Chordeiles minor aserriensis* Cherrie. Cherrie's Night Hawk. The breeding form of *Chordeiles minor* in Cameron County is represented in the collection by a good series of this subspecies taken between April 25 and June 17. On the

latter date Kimball took a set of two eggs, "half incubated."

*Chordeiles minor sennetti* Coues. Single specimens of Sennett's Night Hawk were taken May 3, 24, and June 5.

*Chordeiles minor henryi* Cassin. Western Night Hawk. A male was collected on April 24.

*Chordeiles minor hesperis* Grinnell. Pacific Night Hawk. Kimball took a male of this western form on April 19. For the identification of all of the night hawks in this collection I am indebted to Dr. H. C. Oberholser, our best authority on this difficult group.

*Empidonax flaviventris* (W. M. Baird and S. F. Baird). Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Four females taken between May 19 and 29 extend by more than two weeks the recorded period of occurrence of this flycatcher in the region during spring migration.

*Thryomanes bewicki cryptus* Oberholser. Texas Wren. Young well able to fly were collected April 22 and May 7.

#### ***Geothlypis trichas insperata*, subsp. nov.**

Type.—No. 66467, University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, adult male, Rio Grande Delta below Brownsville, Texas, collected June 11, 1930, by H. H. Kimball (original number 440).

Subspecific characters.—Similar to *Geothlypis trichas trichas* (Linnaeus) but bill larger, forehead more whitish, and general coloration paler.

Compared with *Geothlypis trichas occidentalis* Brewster it is smaller (wing of male 55–56 mm. instead of 55–60 mm.) but has a larger bill. The belly and flanks are more whitish, but the forehead is less extensively white.

Compared with *Geothlypis trichas brachidactyla* (Swainson) it is paler and has a shorter wing but an even larger bill. The ninth primary of *insperata* is shorter than the fourth, instead of longer as in *brachidactyla*. Two juveniles of the new form, taken June 2 and 4, are much paler and have larger bills than any of a series of juveniles of *brachidactyla* with which I have compared them.

*Geothlypis trichas insperata* has the ninth primary shorter than the fourth, as in *Geothlypis trichas ignota* Chapman, but is much paler and has a very much larger bill. The larger bill alone is sufficient to separate *insperata* from the Pacific coast forms.

The new form differs from *Geothlypis trichas melanops* (Baird) of Mexico in being much smaller and in having the belly much more whitish.

Measurements.—Adult male, wing—53 to 56 (54.4) mm.; tail—48 to 53 (51.4) mm.

Range.—Known only from the type locality.

Material examined.—Five adult males, one juvenile male, one unsexed juvenile of *insperata*. Adequate series of all previously described adjacent forms.

The other forms of *Geothlypis trichas* found as migrants or winter residents in the Brownsville region are *occidentalis*, *trichas*, and *brachidactyla* (April 17, 18, May 23), the last being new to the Griscom and Crosby list. All of these are represented in the Kimball collection. Apparently the resident form here described leaves the region entirely during the winter.

I am much indebted to Dr. H. C. Oberholser for his generous assistance in the diagnosis of this warbler and for the use of indispensable comparative material in the U. S. Biological Survey collection.

*Agelaius phoeniceus megapotamus* Oberholser. Rio Grande Redwing. Four juveniles taken between June 17 and July 4 are strikingly different from comparable specimens of *Agelaius phoeniceus phoeniceus*. They are much more narrowly streaked below and more heavily marked with paler buff above. The face, throat, and even the breast are strongly suffused with pink instead of yellow. Thus the juveniles of *megapotamus* differ from the northern form in the same way that the adult female does and apparently in even greater degree. Kimball also secured a series of adults and on May 16 took a set of four eggs "a quarter incubated."

*Arremonops rufivirgatus rufivirgatus* (Lawrence). Texas

Sparrow. Kimball took a set of four fresh eggs of the Texas sparrow on May 31, and on May 29 and 30 collected three fully fledged young.

The only description of the juvenal plumage of the Texas sparrow seems to be the very fragmentary one by Sennett.<sup>3</sup> Ridgway<sup>4</sup> apparently described inadvertently the young of some other species. This plumage, as represented by Kimball's three specimens, differs from the adult plumage as follows: More yellowish green above. No crown stripes. Head finely and back more coarsely spotted with fuscous. Wing coverts tipped with buff. Edge of wing yellowish white. Under parts and sides of head washed with olive buff. Streaks of fuscous form a broad band across the breast and extend partly down the sides. Throat and mid-ventral area more whitish than the rest of the under parts.

*Chondestes grammacus grammacus* (Say). Eastern Lark Sparrow. In addition to four western lark sparrows, Kimball took one typical eastern bird on April 16. This form is apparently rare at Brownsville. Griscom and Crosby had seen but three specimens, taken October 4, 1912, and April 9, 1877.

<sup>3</sup> *Bull. U. S. Geol. and Geog. Surv. Terr.*, 5, 1879: 395.

<sup>4</sup> *Bull. U. S. Nat. Mus.*, 50 (pt. 1), 1901: 447.





