

## SEASONAL HIGHLIGHTS • BREEDING SEASON 1993

### Breeding evidence for Black-necked Stilt in Jackson County

Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) records for the state are few and mostly recent, although Ridgway (1881, 1889) indicated that the species bred in some Illinois locations. Between 1959 and 1988, there were six records all from the northern two-thirds of the state for this very rare vagrant or migrant (Bohlen 1989).

A sight record for southern Illinois was established in 1992 (DeNeal 1993) when a bird was seen on 3 July at Rend Lake in Jefferson County, followed by a bird seen by Jim Herkert and others at Easter Slough in Pulaski County, 4-7 July. Interestingly, these first southern Illinois sight records were followed by breeding evidence in 1993.

It began with the sighting of three individuals on 21 and 22 May 1993 by Robert Danley in the Gorham area of the Mississippi River flood plain, Jackson County. Danley later relocated what may possibly have been the same birds about 10 miles south at Grand Tower Island, Missouri. This island is part of Missouri but on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. Up to six birds were seen in the flooded fields outside the levee from 19 June to 7 July 1993. Mark Seiffert saw what he believed to be copulatory behavior on 20 June 1993. Two more stilts were discovered the same day just east of Grand Tower Island in Jackson County on an island in the flooded fields between the Big Muddy and the Mississippi levees.

I suspected that the birds might be breeding on these temporary "islands" in the middle of the flooded fields. On 24 June 1993, Jim Herkert and I canoed to the island and were met by an agitated stilt flying around the island and calling repeatedly. It alighted occasionally only to fly again. We docked the canoe at the north end of the island and walked south. The island was planted last year but this year consisted of a sparse ground cover of mostly early successional forbs with some exposed soil. When we returned to the north end of the island, both birds alighted ahead of us on the mud flats. We searched for a nest and incited one of the birds to exhibit a broken wing act. We approached within 20 feet of the bird. Unable to quickly locate a nest, we retreated, choosing not to disturb the pair.

I revisited the site again on 26 June 1993, but found no stilts. The water level had risen on the island, concurrent with the great flood of 1993, and that may have contributed to site abandonment.

Additional Black-necked Stilts were seen in the area by Steve Bailey. A pair were seen and suspected of breeding in Union County between 30 June and 12 July 1993 although a search could not locate a nest. Eleven individuals were seen in Union and Jackson counties and Grand Tower Island, Missouri, on 7 July 1993. The last sightings of stilts in the area were of four seen north of Gorham, Illinois on 21 August 1993 by Cody Smout and Robert Danley.

Although it is not known whether breeding was successful, the distraction display seen on 24 June 1993 constitutes positive confirmation of a breeding attempt according to the criteria outlined by the Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas Project.

The closest confirmed breeding records to Illinois are in Missouri (just two counties west of the Mississippi River) and most recently in Kentucky approximately 25 miles southwest of Cairo at the southern tip of Illinois in Fulton County. Southeast Missouri has recorded Black-necked Stilts as breeding birds since 1990. Three nest sites, two of which fledged young, were discovered in southeastern Stoddard County, Missouri in 1990 (Robbins and Easterla 1992) and they have bred there every year since. Their population has increased and in 1993 over 20 individual stilts were seen and two nests found. Predation of these nests was suspected (Jim Smith, pers. comm., Missouri Dept. of Conservation). Kentucky, during the summer of 1993, confirmed its first nesting record of Black-necked Stilt with nests and four pairs of adults, each attending a brood of four chicks at Open Pond on 19 June in Fulton County (Palmer-Ball and Bennett 1993).

— Todd Fink, Rt. 1 Box 220, Ozark, IL 62972

### Long-eared Owl breeding evidence in Ogle County

On 19 May 1993 adjacent to Nachusa Grasslands, owned by the Nature Conservancy, we found a dead female Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*) in a privately owned pine plantation near Franklin Grove. We examined the bird and found a brood patch indicative of nesting. Brood patches are developed with the loss of feathers of the abdomen, about three to five days before the first eggs are laid, and are a means of transferring as much body heat as

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