

New Breeding Records for Champaign County

During the 1993 breeding season, new definitive evidence of breeding was obtained for three species in Champaign County: Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*), and Blue Grosbeak (*Guiraca caerulea*).

Least Bittern

On 10 July Myrna Deaton and Richard Palmer from Decatur met me at the Middlefork Forest Preserve in northeast Champaign County to see a Henslow's Sparrow on territory there for the first time in over 30 years. After finding the sparrow, we checked a few other areas including a wet meadow and small pond. Deaton spotted a Least Bittern in some cattails along the edge of the pond. Adult Least Bitterns were observed there on subsequent visits.

On 25 July, having failed to locate any adult bitterns, I walked through wet vegetation along an overgrown side of the pond, where I spotted what initially appeared like three clumps of fluff from cattail heads. When two of the clumps moved, I realized they were in fact downy young Least Bitterns creeping along the cattail stems. I then spotted a third juvenile assuming the classic freeze posture with its bill pointed skyward. The birds were about the same size as recently fledged Red-winged Blackbirds. Although they were mostly covered with down, rusty primaries were emerging. The following weekend, a young Least Bittern barely capable of flight was found on a pond about .25 mile away from the original pond. This may represent a member of a second brood or indicate the rapid development of the young birds. These recently fledged birds are the first confirmed breeding record in Champaign County although the species presumably bred in pre-settlement days.

Least Flycatcher

On 10 July, after watching a Least Bittern with Myrna Deaton at the Middlefork Forest Preserve, I heard the distinct "chebek" call of the Least Flycatcher repeated incessantly, but could not find the bird. The following day, while trying to locate the bittern for Elaine Regehr, I again heard the flycatcher and spotted the singer in a nearby dense thicket of willows, somewhat denser than

the neighboring Willow Flycatchers preferred. While Least Flycatchers are occasionally seen in central Illinois in June and July, they are usually either late spring or early fall migrants.

Despite the very early date, I suspected this was a migrant, since it coincides with a 10 July date for an early migrant (Bohlen 1989). However, on several subsequent visits to see the Least Bitterns, I noticed that the Least Flycatcher persisted in singing as if on territory. Finally, on 25 July, I saw another Least Flycatcher (based on its identical appearance to the male Least, and to its soft "Whit" call, contrasting with the sharper "Wheet" calls of the Willow Flycatcher and "Speet" calls of the Acadian Flycatcher) that seemed anxious. Both adults, also, were carrying food. The female then flew into a dense thicket of willow where there were several young birds begging and crying. I peered in and saw a female feed a fledgling with a very short tail, heavy greenish cast, and brownish wingbars. The male also carried food into the thicket.

Least Flycatchers have not often been recorded in Illinois during the breeding season, and are rarely found in central Illinois. Bohlen (1989) mentioned several summer records but only one recent confirmed central Illinois breeding record from Siloan Springs State Park near Quincy. In late June 1992, two males were located at Iroquois County Conservation Area, just 35 miles northeast of this year's Champaign County site. If mid-summer birds are found in suitable habitat, however, the possibility of breeding should be explored.

Blue Grosbeak

Rick Wright and I began the 10 May 1991 Spring Bird Count at an abandoned gravel pit, overgrown with brush, just south of Mahomet. As we stepped out of our car, a Blue Grosbeak sang. We soon located the bird in a tree just above the car. Since the species is a rare migrant in Champaign County, we were appropriately excited.

Even more exciting was the fact that the Blue Grosbeak remained all summer. There was one record of summering Blue Grosbeaks (a pair and a single male) in the county, but the species had never been confirmed as breeding. In 1991, the male Blue Grosbeak was usually seen alone, but once a female was seen.

The bird had seemingly disappeared from the area by 1992. But when the location was checked on 8 August 1992, a male was seen. Local birders suspected the bird was present all summer.

More attention was paid to this area in 1993 when a male was seen frequently from late May until early August within a fairly large territory (approximately 80 acres but