

Birding in Lincoln in the Early 1950s

Gene Anderson

Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus, University of California Riverside

From 1947 to 1955 I lived in Lincoln. In 1955, when I was 14, my parents moved to southern California, where I have lived ever since. I return to Lincoln only rarely—most recently in November of 2010.

By 1955 I had become a serious if beginning-level birdwatcher, and I kept some notes, so I can reconstruct bird life there in those days. I can thus compare birds then with what I saw in 2010.

Lincoln has grown since then—about doubled in size—but of course southern California's cities have grown much more, wiping out much more habitat. Lincoln has done a fine job at not only saving the best, but restoring a great deal. In my youth, there was no tallgrass prairie anywhere near the city, except for remnants along railways and ditches. Now there are hundreds of acres of restored prairie. I think the restorations began with the fine one in Pioneers Park, which had attracted grasshopper sparrows (unknown in Lincoln in my youth) by the time of my previous visit around 1990. The University of Nebraska has worked native plants, including prairie grasses, into ornamental plantings around campus. Many farms have been abandoned or gone into grazing, allowing for natural recovery of a great deal of prairie.

In the early 1950s, north 27th St. was a prime birding area. The city stopped before Salt Creek, and beyond that was a dirt road with many ponds along it. I saw my first snow geese and many of the commoner ducks there. Now there is a notably unlovely chain-franchise strip along the street, but north of I-80 it is as it used to be, with Harris and white-throated sparrows thronging the plum thickets. Best of all, though, many of the wetlands are saved, including a spectacularly fine salt wetland right in the midst of the motels. It was a relict, most of it farmed, when I was young; it is now beautifully restored as prairie and wetland.

Lost to us, however, is one of the best birding spots of all: Salt Lake. Now the center of a subdivision, it was then a wild and lonely place, usually part-full of saline water, but sometimes dry and sometimes bank-full. It was surrounded by hundreds of acres of saline temporary wetlands. Virtually no one visited it except seasonal duck hunters. I saw there my first snowy plovers, Wilson's phalaropes, black and Forster's terns, and many shorebirds. In general, shorebirds were much commoner back then, and in spring and fall one could see flocks of hundreds of mixed "peep," dowitchers, lesser yellowlegs and other shorebirds. Sometimes there must have been thousands of shorebirds at Salt Lake.

At the other end of town, the city ended with the Country Club, and south 27th St. beyond that was, again, a dirt road through farms. Today the city has grown, producing solid suburb where I used to watch pheasants, bobwhites, and sparrows.

In those days every farm had windbreaks and hedgerows. Most of these went, unfortunately, not long afterward, due to tragically misinformed policies. There were reports, for instance, that windbreaks took more in space and fertility than they saved in wind damage. This was disproved, at least as a general finding, but the old windbreaks were gone, and the hedgerows with them, as well as most of the wild plum thickets. This has evidently had an effect on bird numbers. Bobwhites, shrikes and kestrels are certainly down. Both species of meadowlarks were common back then; I don't know their status now, but the western meadowlark has almost disappeared in southern California and become much rarer all over the west, because of similar changes.

On the other hand, the old riparian woodlands along Salt Creek and Beal Slough south of town are an amazing success story, and I am deeply grateful to whomever saved them as parkland. I saw my first cuckoos (both species) in the Beal Slough woods, as well as my first indigo buntings, blue grosbeaks, and other species.

Pioneers Park has restored a great deal of woodland too. In the 1950s, long-eared owls wintered in the pines along the road into the park; I once counted 15. The usual ducks and other migrant birds came through, and a Townsend's solitaire could often be found in winter.

The city was amazingly green back then, with trees and shrubs everywhere. These were filled, in migration, with warblers, vireos, thrushes, and finches; in winter, with juncos, sparrows, and occasional red crossbills, pine siskins, kinglets, and brown creepers. Especially common among garden plantings were lilacs, used for nesting by many birds. Lincoln described itself as the "lilac city." These are now almost all gone. Asking around, I was told that a blight passed through a couple of decades ago, wiping them out. This clearly was a disaster for birds and people. I hope someone is planting resistant varieties somewhere.

One interesting change I notice in town birds is that red-bellied woodpeckers have invaded (to my delight). They were shy and strictly confined to the wilder riparian woods, in my youth. Now there was a pair at my former home, and individuals elsewhere in town. They have thus joined their close relatives the golden-fronted woodpecker (of Texas and Latin America) and the Gila woodpecker (of Arizona and northwest Mexico) as town birds. The genus seems to be very adaptable. Hairy and downy woodpeckers are around, but the red-headed, common in my day, seems to be about gone (as in much of its range).

Winter farmland in those days supplied open ground for rough-legged hawks, northern shrikes, horned larks, Lapland longspurs, tree sparrows, and other species, including now and then a peregrine falcon. In the summer, Swainson's hawks replaced the rough-legs, and were common nesters. In 2010 I saw large numbers of red-tailed hawks and one rough-leg (eating a squirrel on the University of Nebraska campus!). I wonder how the Swainson's hawks are doing—they have gotten rarer in California.

Traveling through Nebraska, I found similar changes everywhere. Woodlands have expanded, natural grasslands have recovered or been restored very widely, marshes and wetlands are preserved. On the other hand, farms are not as wildlife-friendly as they used to be. It is time to get the word out and encourage farmers to restore windbreaks and hedgerow thickets.

Above all, I am really impressed with the superb job of saving wetlands and of restoring Pioneers Park, and with the wonderful wildlife center at the park. It is all a dramatic and welcome change from the situation in 1955, when birders were few and no one thought of restoring native habitat.

2010