

Audubon's Orioles are a Valley specialty

by Jim Seeden

Most of you have seen orioles. They're orange and black with a few white feathers on their wings. That's not true of an Audubon's oriole; it's yellow and black. Only one other oriole, Scott's, which isn't found here, is also yellow and



black. Since we're at the northern tip of the Audubon's range, in the U.S., you'll only find them here in the Valley.

Until recently, Audubon's orioles weren't thought to nest here in Texas, but they've raised young ones here at Rancho Lomitas for several years. We've watched them build nests, chase away cowbirds, and feed their little ones.

They come regularly to my bird feeders. They like orange halves, suet blocks, black oil sunflower seeds occasionally and, especially, marshmallows. And, they dearly love the birdbath on a hot day.

They announce their arrival at the feeders with a raspy, "erh-erh-erh" call and can often be heard singing a pleasant tune that sounds remarkably like a person whistling.

Their plumage is very distinctive. The head, wings and tail are black while the remainder of the body is bright yellow. On the female, the yellow of the back is tinged with olive. The black flight feathers of the wings have narrow edges of white. The black beak, straight and pointed, has a blue patch at the base of the lower mandible. They're as bright and charming a visitor as you might hope to see.

Their nests are cup shaped, composed of grasses, hair and fibers, and placed among twigs in the upper, outer branches of trees, not near the trunk. We've observed them, when nesting in mesquite trees, weaving living leaves into the nesting materials. It provides amazing camouflage. Both parents share in the chores of parenthood.

An Audubon's regular diet consists of insects and berries. During nesting season they rely primarily on insects because of the protein provided.

The population appears to be on a slow decline, which may result from habitat loss but is due, at least in part, to nest predation by bronzed cowbirds. Audubon's are on some watch-lists of species whose existence may be in peril.

I thoroughly enjoy the Audubon's orioles here at the ranch and hope you'll also be able to find pleasure in seeing them. Our wildlife diversity offers many delights.