



Two of Our Most Colorful Warm-Weather Friends:

Western Kingbirds (left)

and

Bullock's Orioles (right)

BY JIM HIATT OF HUNGRY HOLLOW



The Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) and the Bullock's Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*), follow the warm weather north from Mexico and Central America and bring us some early Spring color. Both of these migratory beauties follow the heat, though the Bullock's Oriole usually arrives 2-3 weeks earlier than the Western Kingbird in March and April--you can almost predict them on your calendar!

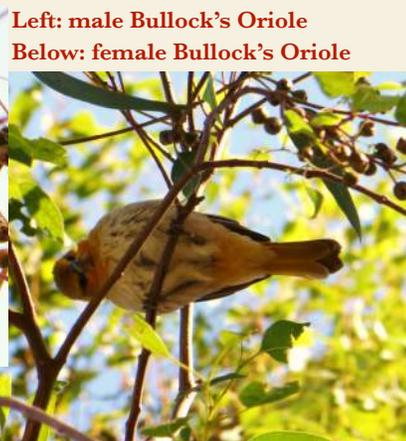
As our local birder Jim Hiatt tells us, "Neither of these are city-birds, but birds of the open field and of farmyards where there are lots of trees and fence-lines." I asked him to tell us about them both for this Spring-into-Summer issue:

"As the Orioles are usually here marginally first, we'll tell their story first. They are likely the most spectacularly beautiful bird here (seen at right) with one of the loveliest calls--ranking them along with Meadowlarks for beauty and variety of tuning. Somewhat like Finches, they have a longish sentence in a single communicate, and earlier in their season here the call begins with two to four "hmmm-hmmm" notes that sound much like the sound at the lower end of a bass harmonica, and then a rapid staccato of whistles, warbles, twitters leading up to a "Wheee-o" ending.



Another is just a prolonged "hmmm-hummm-hmmm-ing." Later in the summer, this changes somewhat in the order uttered, the "Hmm-Hmm-s" may come closer to the end--making you wonder what they are communicating differently. The females have a much shorter call of one-two notes and duller in tone. The male also gives one- or two-note whistles to his little bride, as well.

Plumage-wise, they are a most brilliant yellow-orange, but have a black throat, top of the head, back, and tail, with black-n-white wings. As is typical of the female of bird species, the females are a much abbreviated version of the colorful males: in this case, with olive-brown upper parts, a yellowish head and throat, and whitish underparts.



Left: male Bullock's Oriole
Below: female Bullock's Oriole

All photos taken by Jim Hiatt in 2013-14 in Capay Valley and Hungry Hollow

"Birds of North America, The Complete Photographic Guide to Every Species" will add to your enjoyment (see page 625 of that bird bible)

Bullock's Orioles also have the most unique and noteworthy nesting habits of all our local birds. They construct a spherical "globe" of grasses, string, twine, vines, horsehair where available, and even light packing materials. These nests have a hole "sewn" into them towards the tops and the mother enters and lays her eggs at the bottom of this, and the young are raised initially there. These nests are sewn together at the very ends of branches or on side twigs along the branch edges. One Sycamore, as we have here, may have 6-8 of these, although when these birds have left for the season, I've examined the nests, and some are notably more raggedy than others, which makes me suspect that they don't re-use the same nests each year, as many Owls and Hawks do. Worthy of note is that these creations are very durable, as some survive for severak years, weather and all, after they've served their purpose. No other bird here does something like these; it's just "hard-wired" into their little brains to just *know* what to do. They didn't learn from Mom or Dad, nor does anyone offer courses in "Nestology 101 according to Species." They just *know*.



In earlier times when horses were much more in abundance, here, the nests were made of mainly hair from the horse's mane, so earlier generations called these the "Horsehair Oriole."





And of The Western Kingbird

*Typically laying 1 brood of
2-7 eggs April-July*

JIM HIATT WRITES:

These little chatterboxes are the first to announce the morning, when you have the first glow in the east, and the last to go "nite-nite" in the evening. Seems that the approaching lower light of the evening has a somewhat alarming effect on them, as it's interrupted their normal day's activities. Almost exclusively an insect eater, they will eat berries as well when available. They're

very accomplished aerial acrobats, and you'll occasionally see two in a "tussle" from a hundred or so feet up, kicking, biting,

and flapping at each other over and over in somersaults, but somehow they both know just when they're within about 4 feet of the ground, as they always seem to just avoid crashing. Last year I was able to get pix of one Kingbird nest---while I was doing up the Mourning Dove article; went past it in the crotch of Eucalyptus tree while on the way to the higher crotch of a Mourning Dove nest and eggs. These have a twig base, and an inner-woven cup of grasses and lighter stuffs, and the nest I saw had 4 eggs. These were a pink-white egg with brown to chestnut brown spots---see photo above.

Western Kingbird, one of my favorite warm-weather birds, has some pretty interesting behavior from arrival here in early April, through late August--wherein the last two days they're simply *GONE*. Migration occurs at night, so you don't see hordes of them traveling southward during the day. They're silent in the latter part of their time here, although their daily hunting habits continue. Once, while

do, so that what seems like sunset to us seems to them like the last of twilight. Therefore, they are alarmed that they are having trouble seeing any more, whereupon when daylight arrives, they can see to resume their normal activities. As the warmer period progresses, they remain very chatty until about mid-July, in which their vocalizing gradually slows until into Mid-August, when they grow altogether silent, like they *know* that the time to leave again is

near at hand. I'm convinced that it's not the warmth itself that makes them "know" it's time to go south again, as they might leave just before Dove Season begins (Sept.1) when the temperatures are over 100F. It more likely has to do with the sun's position in the sky, which is the very same stimulus that brings them back the next spring. I have seen years when they arrive when it is downright cold here. My old Ornithology Prof., at CSUS, Miklos Deserios Francis

doing a 2-mile walk at precisely this time of the year, maybe 4 years ago, over on the historic Merritt Ranch field, one Kingbird--seemingly to make a point to get my attention--flew a complete circle around me, and then headed south, as though saying "Good-bye, friend, until next year! I have to go now!"

But they are here, now. They show up within a couple weeks one way or

the other, coming back up from Mexico and Central America where they've spent the winter after migrating from here. When they first arrive they are extremely vocal, and are the first to chatter in the morning and the last you'll hear in the evening, and I think that has to do with spending their whole day basically feeding, and perhaps because, like chickens, they having pupils that don't dilate as much as ours

Udvardy, who was world-renowned as one of the best in the business, agreed with me on this, and affirmed that the sun's position affects the travels of many others as well.

I've watched and observed birds all my life, and feel a special kinship with this species. One very good reason for this is: they have a sort of "giggling" call, and since my youngest daughter Carrie's giggle sounded just like theirs, I used to call her "My little kingbird."

Not to be confused with the somewhat similarly bright yellow-breasted Western Meadowlark, also abundant this time of year, seen below.

