

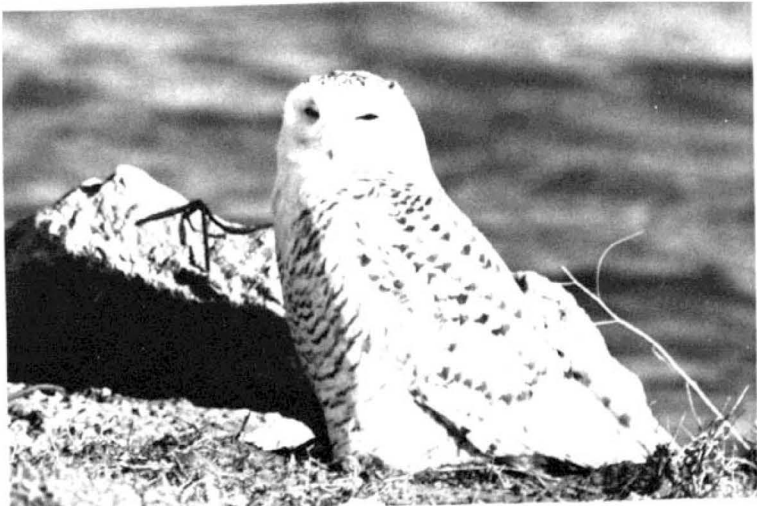
THE SNOWY OWL IN OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN S. SHACKFORD

Imagine my astonishment on 10 December 1974 when, having stopped my car on Interstate Highway 35 just northwest of Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, to check what I supposed was a road-kill white-breasted hawk, I found at my feet a Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*), the first I had ever seen. I assumed it would be my last; but no, during the following several weeks this visitor from the far north was to invade Oklahoma in unprecedented numbers; before the winter was over I was myself to see three more of the great birds, all of them alive and well.

EARLY RECORDS

So far as is known, the Snowy Owl first visited Oklahoma in 1880. On 10 December of that year D. W. Jones collected a specimen near McAlester, Pittsburg County, southeastern Oklahoma (Nice, 1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, p. 105):

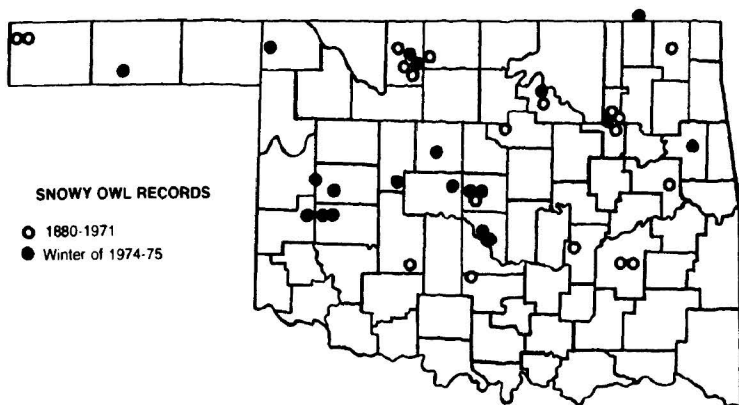


SNOWY OWL

One of two birds discovered by Brad Carlton at Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City on 16 December 1974. Photographed on 20 December 1974 by John S. Shackford.

according to the label for the mounted bird, which is now in the Kansas State Museum in Topeka, it was "shot while attempting to kill Doves or tame Pigeons [sic]." Thirty-seven years later (winter of 1917-18) a second Oklahoma specimen was obtained, this one in Craig County, northeastern Oklahoma, by G. W. Stevens (Nice, *loc. cit.*). In December 1918 a third specimen was taken, this one in Pawnee County, north-central Oklahoma, by R. O. Whinton, and another bird was seen in Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma, by R. C. Tate (Nice, *loc. cit.*). After a further lapse of 11 years, on 25 December 1929, R. C. Tate again saw a Snowy Owl in Cimarron County (Nice, *loc. cit.*).

There is no Oklahoma record of any sort for the species between the years 1929 and 1951, but between 1951 and 1974 enough sightings occurred every third year (and then only) to suggest cyclic southward migration related to some such factor as heavy snow-cover or lemming shortage in the far north. Briefly stated, these sightings are: in 1951, specimen taken near Braggs, Muskogee County, east-central Oklahoma (mounted; now at Northeastern State College in Tahlequah, Oklahoma; L. H. Bally letter of 21 February 1956 to G. M. Sutton); fall of 1953, two specimens taken in north-central Oklahoma, one by W. A. York near Nash, Grant County (photo filed at OU Bird Range), the other by Dean Gray near Cherokee, Alfalfa County (mounted; now in Mr. Gray's possession); 12 December 1956, at McAlester, Conductor J. Pingleton, while in a locomotive doing a "routine spotting" of railroad cars, reached out and grabbed "as if it were a mail bag" an owl that was "using a switch stand for a perch" (bird well photographed and released; two photographs filed at OU Bird Range); early December 1959, two seen in central Oklahoma — one at the Oklahoma City airport in Oklahoma County, the other in Garvin County near Lindsay — and reported to John G. Newell (1960, Audubon Field Notes, 14: 321); in 1960, one "found" 7 December near Holdenville, Hughes County, central Oklahoma, by L. Stiles (1961, Audubon Field Notes, 15: 342), another seen 14 December in Mohawk Park, Tulsa, Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma, by Anne Reynolds, L. B. Reynolds, Ethel Getgood, *et al.*, seen again on 16 December "on the airfield adjoining Mohawk Park . . . by C. E. Brown and Lewis Davis," and found dead on 17 December, having been "killed by a passing car on a highway [a county road just southwest of Catoosa, Rogers County] northeast of Tulsa" (Chase and Reynolds, 1962, Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci., 42: 91); in 1963, one seen repeatedly from "early November" to 7 December near Lake Carl Blackwell, Payne County, north-central Oklahoma by various observers including (on 6 and 7 December) F. M. Baumgartner and his wife Marguerite (1964, Audubon Field Notes, 18: 367), one seen on 6 December in Mohawk Park northeast of Tulsa by P. A. Aldridge, H. S. Davis, and C. E. Brown, and two seen on 12 December in the Tulsa area by P. A. Aldridge and H. S. Davis; 14 December 1966, one seen on Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma, by F. L. Bolwahn and R.



H. Stratton (1967, Audubon Field Notes, 21: 431); 11 March 1967, one seen on the same refuge by R. H. Stratton; and 13 December 1971, one seen perched on fencepost near Cyril, Caddo County, southwest Oklahoma, by W. G. Voelker.

Fully acceptable records among those discussed above indicate fall occurrence ("early November" to 25 December) rather than overwintering, the one late-winter or spring record (11 March 1967) being of a bird that might well have overwintered at the Salt Plains refuge. During no single winter were more than three birds known to have been seen. Another point strikes me as being worth mentioning: only one winter of those mentioned above (that of 1917-18) is listed by Gross (1947, Auk, 64: 588) in his discussions of "cyclic invasions"; during this particular winter Snowy Owls must have moved southward into the Great Plains in considerable numbers: in Iowa alone 23 of them "were taken or seen" (DuMont, 1933, Wilson Bull., 45: 82).

1974-75 INVASION IN OKLAHOMA

In the winter of 1974-75 the Snowy Owl moved into Oklahoma in record numbers. Three specimens were preserved, two as skins, one as a mount, and so varied in color pattern were living birds seen and photographed — some almost pure white, others more or less heavily marked with gray — that a grand total of 20 birds is surely no exaggeration. Furthermore, some of these actually overwintered, one exceptionally white bird in particular having been observed repeatedly by others and me between 6 January and 14 February.

The species first appeared on 30 November, on which date Darrel Duncan saw one "on the ground in a field" in Texas County, in the Panhandle, several miles southwest of Guymon (Rita Longbotham letter of 10 January 1975 to G. M. Sutton). On 3 December (weather clear, cold, and windy, but snow melting), Gary L. Collins happened upon a very white bird perched on a telephone pole in eastern Tulsa County (10 miles east of Tulsa); alerted persons gathered from

near and far to watch the bird as it flew from snowpatch to snowpatch that day and on 4 December, on which date it was photographed by Joel P. McConnell, Herbert L. Keating, and Elizabeth Hayes. On 10 December the dead Cleveland County specimen referred to at the first of this paper (very thin female, UOMZ 7906, right leg with gangrenous old wound, remains of at least one cotton rat in stomach) was found; later that morning a living bird, flying from fencepost to fencepost, was observed along the same stretch of highway by J. Teague Self and his wife Ida. On 16 December two large, heavily barred birds were discovered by Brad Carlton near Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City; these were observed repeatedly from 16 to 20 December by John G. Newell, Henry Walter, V. J. Vacin, W. D. Harden, *et al.*, and photographed by Wesley Isaacs, J. Brooks Parkhill, and myself, and a single much-banded bird, presumably one of the same two, was seen in the same general area on 21 December by J. G. Newell, Gary Lee, *et al.* On 17 December a not very heavily marked bird, perched on a power-line pole near Skedee, Pawnee County, north-central Oklahoma, was seen by R. N. McGuinn. On 29 December a fairly heavily marked bird that had been shot was found dead by Game Ranger Jack Witt near Kingfisher, Kingfisher County, central Oklahoma (mounted specimen in collection of Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation).

On 4 January, Howard W. Goard and his wife Dotty saw and photographed a very white bird at the Coffeyville, Kansas airport about 10 miles north of Elliott, Nowata County, northeastern Oklahoma (two photos filed at OU Bird Range). From 6 January to 14 February a small-looking, exceptionally white bird was seen repeatedly in Canadian County northwest of Oklahoma City, first by Henry Walter and J. S. Roberts, subsequently by several other persons, including me. This bird I made a point of following about, photographing, and observing at length (see last section of this paper).

On 11 January, Alan Kocan saw two Snowy Owls while hunting near the southwest corner of the Salt Plains refuge. He and his two companions watched the birds flying low over grassland, perching on fenceposts, and alighting on the ground among goose decoys, where they remained about 20 minutes before flying off. A Snowy Owl "spotted in a wheat field" by Dr. Kocan later in the day was believed by him to have been one of the same two birds (A. Kocan letter of 4 November 1975 to G. M. Sutton).

A Snowy Owl that appeared in mid-January at the Tahlequah airport in Cherokee County, northeastern Oklahoma, was seen almost daily for about a month by airport personnel; on 17 and 19 February, Everett M. Grigsby and several of his Northeastern State College students observed the bird (Xerox copy of Connie L. Center's field notes).

All other January and February sightings were in the western half of the main body of the state (i. e., east of the 100th meridian). From 18 to 28 January, a "very white" bird was seen repeatedly in open country in Custer and Roger

Mills counties about 6 miles north of Hammon by Lowell Bodkin and John Flick and photographed in Custer County on 28 January by J. Brent Giezentanner (slide filed at OU Bird Range). On 30 January, Warren D. Harden *et al.* saw a "very white" bird in open country in Blaine County 2 miles north of Geary. On 31 January one was seen by Wade Pratt ½ mile north of Butler, Custer County (J. B. Giezentanner letter of 11 February 1975 to G. M. Sutton). On 1 February, near Rosston, Harper County, Laurence E. Dunn found dead a heavily marked specimen that had been shot (very thin female, UOMZ 8013, stomach empty). In the latter half of January and early February at least two (possibly as many as five) birds were seen in pastureland near Canute, Washita County, two "about the middle of January" 6 miles north of town by Cheryl Dean, one at the same place by the same observer about 1 February, and two 5 miles southwest of town on 8 February by Kary Schneberger and his brother Daren (Ina S. Brown letter of 4 March 1975 to G. M. Sutton). On 22 February, during a blizzard, Gladys West saw one among trees at her house along the north edge of Elk City, Beckham County (Ina S. Brown letter of 4 March 1975 to G. M. Sutton).

According to data reported in the five above paragraphs, the 1974-75 invasion lasted from 30 November to 22 February. None of the three specimens found dead had obviously died of starvation, nor had any of the living birds appeared to be in poor condition.

ACTIVITIES OF ONE OWL IN CANADIAN COUNTY

The "small-looking, exceptionally white bird" referred to above I followed about almost daily from 22 to 29 January. I had no trouble recognizing it as an individual, for a large feather was missing from its right wing.

This owl spent most of the daylight hours in an open, roughly oval area of short-grass and plowed fields about 3½ miles long (north-south axis) and 1 mile wide. Day after day I observed it hunting at about the center of this area during the half hour before sunup. After this period of intense activity it moved gradually northward to another area of pastureland where it rested quietly for several hours, perching on a gopher mound, fencepost, or telephone pole, before working its way back to the center of its area in the afternoon. Here, after sundown, it hunted actively for about half an hour, flying southward to another field just before dark. Where it was and what it did after dark I do not know.

When I flushed the bird it usually squared away promptly, holding to a remarkably straight flight-line 6 to 15 feet above ground for distances up to several hundred yards. At times it looked back at me over its shoulder as it flew. If I followed the straight flight-line I had no difficulty locating the bird again even after it had flown out of sight. It had two methods of hunting: circular flights 40-60 yards in diameter about 20-30 feet above ground, and hover flights, each lasting from 15 seconds to two minutes, in comparatively

stationary positions 35-40 feet above ground and about 20 yards apart. Hover flights I observed more often in the evening than in the morning and they were especially frequent in windy weather.

On two occasions in late afternoon I saw the owl pursue a small flock of meadowlarks (*Sturnella* sp.) unsuccessfully. Twice I saw it dive to the ground during crepuscular hunting; but during about 20 hours of observation I never saw it actually catch anything. Its favorite area was inhabited by many small mammals, notably mice, several of which I saw from time to time in certain places. A few other birds of prey frequented the area, among them at least one American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), one Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*), and two or three Marsh Hawks (*Circus cyaneus*). I suspect that the Snowy Owl did much of its hunting at night and that it caught virtually all of its food then. Its activity while hunting just before sunup and just before dark contrasted sharply with its inactivity during the hours of full daylight.

10731 N. WESTERN, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73114, 8 NOVEMBER 1975.

HARRIS'S HAWK IN SOUTHWESTERN OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN W. AULT III

On 9 October 1972, at a place known locally as Mulkey's Crossing, 5 miles east and 3 south of Eldorado, Jackson County, southwestern Oklahoma, I saw a dark hawk perched in a tree along the north edge of the flood-plain of the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River. At first the bird seemed to have no conspicuous field-marks, but when it took flight I could see the white of its upper tail coverts, tail base, and tail tip, then, as it banked, the bright red-brown of its wing coverts, convincing me that it was an adult Harris's Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*). The sighting was noteworthy since, according to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, pp. 114-15), there was only one other record of the species for the state — that of a single bird seen by John G. Newell near Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma, on 29 January 1962 (1962, Audubon Field Notes, 16: 345). Paucity of Oklahoma records has been puzzling in view of the fact that Harris's Hawk actually nested in southwestern Kansas in 1963 (Parmelee and Stephens, 1964, Condor, 66: 443-45).

The terrain in which I saw the bird in Oklahoma was broken and rocky, supporting a growth of buffalo-grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*) and scattered mesquite trees (*Prosopis juliflora*), though hilly fields just to the north were planted in sorghum grains. At the time of the sighting, Victor J. Heller and I were engaged (under the auspices of the Oklahoma Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit) in a project dealing with the ecology of the Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*). Our duties took us afield daily, so I was hopeful of seeing Harris's Hawk again.

On 30 November 1972, Heller and I saw two adult Harris's Hawks perched in a large tree 35 yards from the road about 7 miles southwest of Eldorado,