

Again, in central Oklahoma, this time on 13 September 1954, along the east edge of Norman, I collected what I'd identified as a Philadelphia Vireo (*Vireo philadelphicus*), at that time a species that had never been taken in Oklahoma. I had noted the strongly yellowish tone of the flanks and the rather warm tone on the chest and was confident that the bird was a Philadelphia, this despite the fact that I'd heard a Warbling Vireo (*V. gilvus*) singing more than once that morning in that very area. When I picked the specimen up I saw at once that it was a Warbling Vireo. Its chest was pale buffy, not yellow. For a moment I toyed with the idea that I'd seen one bird and shot another; then I knew that I'd simply misidentified the bird while it was alive.

So nowadays when someone tells me that what he saw was surely a raven (*Corvus corax*) because it was "so much larger" than a crow (*C. brachyrhynchus*), or a Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) because it was "a whole lot bigger" than a Common Grackle (*Q. quiscula*), the first question I ask is this: Was the day foggy? Or, if the moot bird was supposedly a Philadelphia Vireo, I insist on ascertaining that the color of the underparts was the right sort of light, clear yellow and that this color extended throughout the whole of the throat and breast, before I feel sure that the bird was not a Warbling Vireo.

Most bird students are honest; but I have reason to suspect that many of those who dedicate their efforts primarily to building up a "life list" tend to be content with identifications that are not entirely satisfactory. Especially is this true when the "life lister" knows that the locality and season are right for the species he is determined to see. After all, he may have travelled across a continent just to see that particular species.

Here in Cleveland County, Oklahoma, those of us who have worked, really worked, with the birds of the area know that Smith's Longspur (*Calcarius pictus*) is a fairly regular winter resident. We know about when it arrives and about when it departs. We know from specimens carefully collected and examined that the molt into handsome breeding feather does not start while the species is here. We know about where to look for the birds, for they seem to be attracted winter after winter to certain largely treeless fields.

How many of us know just what to look for in identifying Smith's Longspur — the boldly black-and-white lesser and middle wing coverts in adult males (a feature that can be seen clearly on a bright day as the birds fly past), the strongly buffy tone of the underparts in both sexes, the diagnostic tail pattern? Showing visitors from afar some flying longspurs and announcing that "they could be Smith's Longspurs" is not enough. Falling back on the well documented statement that all four longspurs are known to occur here in winter is not enough. The truly scientific "life lister" will have in mind just what characters to look for and also exactly what the analogous characters are in similar species before he calls his sight record completely valid.

STOVALL MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA, NORMAN 73019, 18 OCTOBER 1977.

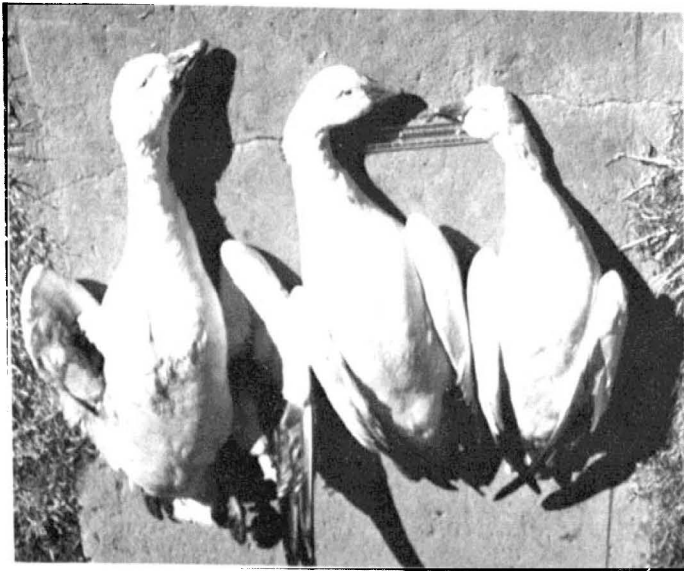
GENERAL NOTES

Brant in Johnston County, Oklahoma.—On the clear, cold, windy afternoon of 21 November 1976, at the Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge in Johnston County, south-central Oklahoma, we sighted through our tripod-mounted telescope a light-bellied immature Brant (*Branta bernicla*). When first seen, the bird was in a tightly bunched flock of geese, all of which were swimming not far from shore in an arm of Lake Texoma a hundred

yards or so from us. In the flock were about 400 small Canada Geese (*B. canadensis*), a few large Canada Geese, and two Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*), one an adult of the blue form, the other an immature individual of the white form. We observed the Brant closely for about ten minutes. We could see it clearly part of this time, but frequently it was obscured when the restless flock moved about it. We could see no white on its neck. Shortly after we had identified the Brant to our satisfaction, the flock began flying to a plowed field not far from the lake shore. The birds were now only about 75 yards from us. Again we found the Brant, and this time we could see that its underparts were white. Presently a passing car put all of the geese to flight. When we last saw the flock it was headed toward the far side of the lake.

According to Sutton (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 5), *Branta bernicla* has heretofore been reported from Oklahoma four times, twice from Johnston County and twice from Alfalfa County in the north-central part of the state. "Light-bellied" and "black" forms are now considered conspecific, however (see Auk, 1976, 93: 876), so the three "Black Brant" records for Oklahoma (two from Alfalfa County, one from Beaver County at the east end of the Panhandle) mentioned by Sutton (*loc. cit.*) are also records for *Branta bernicla*.—Sue A. Burk and Stephen D. Burk, 735 Highland Parkway, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 11 December 1976.

Ross's Goose on Washita National Wildlife Refuge, west-central Oklahoma.—On 28 December 1976, two Ross's Geese (*Chen rossii*) and a Snow Goose (*C. caerulescens*) were shot as game by Noble Standfield and John Newman about 1 kilometer east of the Washita National Wildlife Refuge in Custer County, west-central Oklahoma. The three birds were with about 20 small Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*).



SNOW GOOSE (LEFT) AND TWO ROSS'S GEES

Photographed at the Washita National Wildlife Refuge in Custer County, west-central Oklahoma, close to the spot where they were shot on 28 December 1976.

All three specimens were brought to refuge headquarters for final identification and sexing. The two Ross's, both fully adult, were much smaller than the Snow. One Ross's, found through cloacal examination (Giles, 1969, *Wildlife management techniques*, The Wildlife Society, Washington, D.C., p. 333) to be a male (1956.1 grams; culmen 45 mm., wing 366, tarsus 74), was considerably larger than the other, a female (cloaca also examined; 1700.9 grams; culmen 40, wing 355, tarsus 69). The Ross's were photographed in color side by side by themselves and also, for comparison, with the Snow. In the photographs the diagnostic bluish tinge in the basal part of the upper mandible shows in each of the Ross's.

The two Ross's are, to the best of our knowledge, the fourth and fifth specimens of the species to have been taken in Oklahoma (Sutton, 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, *Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist.*, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 6; Newsom, 1976, *Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc.*, 9: 32). Both were retained by the hunters, who planned to have them mounted.

From 11 February to 25 March 1977, we observed two or more Ross's Geese repeatedly on the refuge itself — on 11 February, two birds roosting with about 1200 small Canadas and 11 Snows on mudflats adjacent to the Owl Cove area of Foss Reservoir; on 17 and 18 February, three birds by themselves in this same area; from 23 to 25 February, two as they fed and loafed with 3000-4000 small Canadas; on 15 March, five with about 100 small Canadas and seven Snows; and on 25 March, two with this same flock of small Canadas and Snows. On 26 March we could not find a Ross's on the refuge, though we did see 74 Canadas, 18 White-fronted Geese (*Anser albifrons*), and one Snow.

The above-reported Ross's Goose records are the first for the Washita National Wildlife Refuge. The only other Oklahoma records of the species are for the Salt Plains and Tishomingo national wildlife refuges (Sutton, *loc. cit.*; Newsom, *loc. cit.*). The species has been seen several times recently also on the Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge on Lake Texoma near Denison, northeastern Texas (*vide* Karl W. Haller).

All recent Oklahoma and Texas Ross's Goose sightings may well be linked with the observed increase in the numbers of small Canadas that winter on the Washita refuge. The increase of this "shortgrass prairie population" of small Canadas in the Southern Great Plains and its habit of "staging" in Alberta and Saskatchewan before southward migration are discussed by Grieb in his "The shortgrass prairie Canada Goose population" (1970, *Wildlife Monograph No. 22*, The Wildlife Society). A plausible explanation of this occurrence of Ross's with this population of small Canadas is offered by Bellrose (1976, "Ducks, geese, and swans of North America," Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, p. 132), who says: "Where Ross' geese, lesser snow geese and Canada geese associate, whether on breeding areas or on major staging areas, it is likely that departing flocks of one species attract individuals of other species to accompany them. Consequently, areas frequented in winter by geese from the Alberta-Saskatchewan staging area are liable to have some Ross' geese also."

If drought conditions on the high plains continue to push the small "shortgrass prairie" Canada Geese east of their traditional wintering areas, sightings of the Ross's Goose in Oklahoma and elsewhere in the Southern Great Plains may dramatically increase.—Evan V. Klett and C. Craig Heflebower, *Washita National Wildlife Refuge, R.R. #1, Butler, Oklahoma 73625, 8 April 1977*.

Late fall sighting of Mississippi Kite.—On 28 October 1975, my son Robert and I saw five Mississippi Kites (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) soaring in a late afternoon thermal over an open field on our property near Edmond, in the northeastern part of Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma. The birds were at an altitude of about 3000 feet. All five were adult, so far as we could see, there being no bird among them with obviously streaked underparts.

That fall the weather had been persistently warm and insects had continued to be abundant. Kites have nested regularly on and near our place; indeed, we have seen them in summer as long as we have owned the property. When I mow weeds with a "brush hog," one or two of the birds often watch from trees nearby, sometimes circling within 20 to 30 feet of the tractor and making spectacular stoops at insects raised by the mower. If I am afoot, the kites are very shy.

28 October is late indeed for an Oklahoma sighting of this kite. According to G. W. Stevens the species leaves Oklahoma "in rather large flocks in September, usually by the fifteenth" (Bent, 1937, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 167, Pt. 1, p. 69). Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 97) states that the species inhabits Oklahoma "from April 18 to October 7." The summary of records on file at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range makes clear that there have been valid sightings during the first week of October in Woods, Alfalfa, Payne, Washington, and Harmon counties, the latest of one or more birds at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County by H. C. Spore *et al.* on 7 October 1951.—James K. DeVore, *Route 2, Box 218-P, Edmond, Oklahoma 73034, 25 March 1976.*

Dead Cooper's Hawk found in Packrat nest.—On 12 December 1975, near the North Fork of the Red River in Tillman County, southwestern Oklahoma (3 miles east and 7 north of the town of Tipton), my students and I found a dead adult female Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) partly buried in the nest of a Plains Packrat (*Neotoma micropus*). The nest, a heap of twigs and debris, was on the ground in a north-south shelterbelt of Osage orange or bois d'arc (*Maclura pomifera*) in a flat area whose vegetation represented various pre-climax successional stages of the sandsage-grassland community except for a cotton field just east of the shelterbelt.

The hawk appeared to have been dead for several days. We found no evidence that it had been shot; nor was it emaciated. Patches of skin had been torn away from the chest, but we could find no tooth-marks on the dried meat there. The possibility occurred to us that the bird, for some reason unable to fly, had failed to catch a rat at the nest and died there; but a more plausible explanation is that the rats, following their well known propensity to hoard (see Rainey, 1956, Univ. Kansas Publ. Mus. Nat. Hist., 8: 565-66), had found the carcass and dragged it to the nest along with other trash.

Perhaps the rats would have eaten the hawk eventually. The primary food of *N. micropus* is, however, "a great variety of green vegetation, especially the juicy flesh of cactus, but mainly of seeds, nuts and fruit. Cactus fruit and the sweet pods of the mesquite bean are extensively eaten; also acorns, nuts, and any kind of grain within their reach" (Bailey, 1905, N. Amer. Fauna, 25: 112). In northeastern Kansas, according to Fitch and Rainey (1956, Univ. Kansas Publ. Mus. Nat. Hist., 8: 525), the seeds of Osage orange are "probably . . . by far the most important" food of the Eastern Packrat (*N. floridana*); these authors noted, however, that invertebrates and disabled or helpless vertebrates occasionally are eaten: an adult Pilot Blacksnake (*Elaphe obsoleta*) found dead by Fitch and left overnight in a garage at the University of Kansas Natural History Reservation was partly eaten by a packrat.

In south-central Louisiana, on 30 January 1973, Dickson (1976, Southwest. Nat., 20: 413-14) found the intact carcass of a Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)—the very bird he had banded in that same area on 17 May 1972—embedded in the entrance tunnel leading to the nest of an Eastern Packrat. That nest was at the base of a hackberry tree (*Celtis laevigata*) in a bottomland hardwood forest.—Jack D. Tyler, *Dept. Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73501, 15 August 1977.*

Late fall sighting of American Avocet.—At about 1730 on 12 November 1976, my wife Eileen, David A. Wiggins, and I saw an American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*)

just above the Salt Plains Reservoir dam in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma. The bird was feeding in shallow water about 30 meters (100 feet) from shore near a small group of Northern Shovelers (*Anas clypeata*). We watched the bird for several minutes before it flew off across the reservoir. The sighting represents the latest date for fall occurrence in Oklahoma, the latest heretofore on record being 9 November (Sutton, 1974. A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 17). On 9 November 1950 an American Avocet was recorded at Stillwater, Payne County, north-central Oklahoma (1951, Audubon Field Notes, 5: 26): the bird was seen by T. O. Duncan as it "landed a few feet from his duck blind" probably at Boomer Lake (see note from F. M. Baumgartner to G. M. Sutton).—Joseph A. Grzybowski, *Dept. of Zoology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73019, 15 November 1976.*

Food stealing behavior in the Ring-billed Gull.—About 0900 on 25 January 1975 (weather drizzly, air temperature 41° F.), at Lake Helen in Lawton, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma, I observed a Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) attempting to swallow what appeared to be a fair-sized sunfish (*Lepomis* sp.). The first try was futile and the bird dropped the fish.

While the grebe dove to recover the fish, Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) began flying above the point where the grebe went down. The grebe promptly surfaced with the fish and vigorously tried to swallow it. A single adult gull dropped from its soaring flight and flew to within about 1 meter of the grebe. The grebe dropped the fish and dove. The gull quickly retrieved the fish and flew to the north shore.

Bent (1921, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 113: 137), who describes food-stealing behavior of this sort, observed Ring-billed Gulls "hovering over a flock of feeding red-breasted mergansers (*Mergus serrator*) and darting down at them as they rose to the surface. They were apparently trying to rob them of or make them drop some of the fish they had caught." Harden (1971, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 4: 5-6) reports the stealing of a fish from an American Coot (*Fulica americana*) that had hauled its fish out onto the ice.—Charles M. Scott, 5621 S. Madison Pl., Tulsa, Oklahoma 74105, 24 October 1976.

Flock of Short-eared Owls in Washington County, Oklahoma.—Just before sunset on the evening of 20 November 1976, as I was driving along a dirt road 1 mile north and 2 miles east of Dewey, Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma, I realized that a large bird that I saw flying about above the pasture about 300 yards away was not a hawk; from the largeness and roundness of its head and the deep strokes of its wings I knew it to be a Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*). Even as I identified it to my satisfaction, I realized that it was only one of about 40 of the owls, all in the air but one (that was perched on the ground) and no doubt hunting prey, though their behavior seemed like play as they dipped and circled. A Marsh Hawk (*Circus cyaneus*) that flew in a straight line through their midst looked very stiff by comparison.

Late the following afternoon, William Hughes, his wife, Suzette, and I drove across the prairie as close as possible to the place at which I had observed the flock, but we found only Marsh Hawks there. On the morning of 22 November I drove to the place again just before sunup, but looked in vain for the owls.—Ella Delap, 409 N. Wyandotte, Dewey, Oklahoma 74029, 15 January 1977.

How often does the Brown Creeper sing in Oklahoma?—Only once since my coming to Oklahoma to live in the fall of 1952 have I heard the Brown Creeper (*Certhia familiaris*) sing. On 4 December 1963, near my house at 818 W. Brooks St., in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, I heard the full song, watched the bird climbing the main trunk of a small mimosa tree about 25 feet away, heard it and a second Brown Creeper give the usual thin, high *see* call, and watched them both fly across the street. A full song that I heard repeatedly on the species' breeding ground in northwestern Pennsylvania many years ago I jotted down as *dee dwee, did-i-ly, dee dwee* (Sutton, 1928, Ann.

Carnegie Mus., 18: 231); the song I heard in Norman seemed to me to have the same general pattern, though not quite so many syllables. The day was mild, though hardly springlike; I did, however, hear four-noted spring songs of Carolina Chickadees (*Parus carolinensis*) that same day.—George M. Sutton, *Stovall Museum of Science and History, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73019, 28 July 1975.*

Late winter sighting of Black-throated Sparrow.—In late afternoon on 11 February 1977, after a full day of field-work, I found two Black-throated Sparrows (*Amphispiza bilineata*) about 2 miles east of Kenton, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma. The birds were on the ground under low brush on a rocky slope. I saw them clearly. In the same general area were several Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*), White-crowned Sparrows (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*), and Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*). According to the summary of records on file at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, *Amphispiza bilineata* has not heretofore been seen in Oklahoma between 2 January and 3 April (Sutton, 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 46). On 2 January 1962, George M. Sutton collected a male specimen (UOMZ 5595) along Texakeet Creek southeast of Kenton (1962, Audubon Field Notes, 16: 242, 346); on 3 April 1966, John S. Weske collected one (female, UOMZ 5878) of two birds that he saw 2½ mi. east of Kenton. It appears from the above that the Black-throated Sparrow winters sparingly in the Black Mesa region.—Debra L. Hickman, *P.O. Box 376, Warner, Oklahoma 74469, 15 March 1977.*

FROM THE EDITOR: A recent article in *The Oklahoma Observer* (1977, 9: 12) by R. John Taylor and his wife Constance, both on the staff of Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant, Oklahoma, deserves comment. Entitled "Those endangered species," it explores ecological, esthetic, and economic incentives for preserving seemingly insignificant species of plants and animals. The cogent analogy is made between species in their natural environment and thread in woven cloth. Each thread represents a species and the cloth the ecosystem. The cloth weakens in proportion to the number of threads removed because of the interdependence of all organisms. Only a small number of species, among them wheat, corn, chickens, and cattle, are directly "useful" to man; but all of these are descendants of once-wild forms. No species is so trivial that man has a right to obliterate it. What he obliterates might contribute to his survival. Who, for example, would have predicted the derivation of penicillin from bread mold? With increasing world population, destruction of natural areas accelerates proportionately. Forgoing immediate economic gain for intangible values is necessary. Through preserving natural areas we may be protecting ourselves.

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