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WESTERN SCREECH-OWL: A "NEW" BIRD FOR OKLAHOMA

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The Thirty-fourth supplement to the American Ornithologists' Union (A.O.U.) Check-list of North American birds (1982, *Suppl. to* Auk 99:9CC) recognizes the Western Screech-Owl (*Otus kennicottii*) as a species distinct from *O. asio* (now the Eastern Screech-Owl). Formerly, the eastern and western forms of the Screech Owl were given subspecific statuses under *O. asio* (A.O.U., 1957, Check-list of North American birds, Baltimore, Maryland, pp. 273-276). The current status of *O. kennicottii* provides Oklahoma with a "new" species.

A hiatus between the distributions of the Eastern and Western screech-owls apparently exists through the High Plains of the United States and

WESTERN SCREECH-OWL

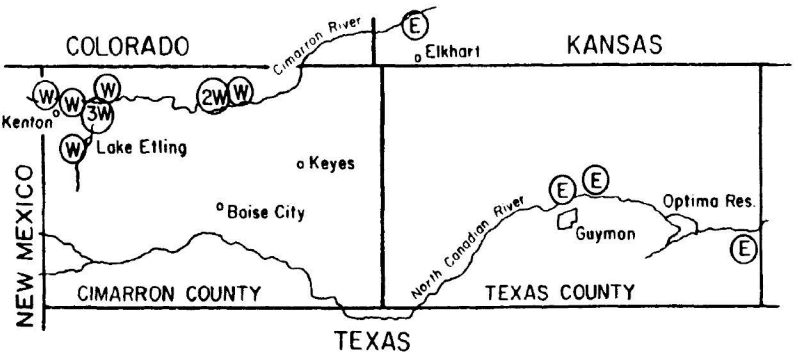
This bird was banded 25 November 1978 at Black Mesa State Park, northwestern Cimarron County, Oklahoma. Photo by the author.

southward into Mexico (Marshall, J. T., Jr., 1967, Monogr. West. Found. Vert. Zool. 1:1-72). This zone of separation in the southern High Plains generally follows a historical gap in the distribution of trees large enough to provide potential nesting holes for screech-owls. Zones of overlap between these species, however, occur along the Rio Grande River in the Big Bend region of Texas (Marshall, *loc. cit.*), and along the Arkansas River in southeastern Colorado, where some hybridization occurs (Marshall, pers. comm.).

Locations of specimens and sightings of screech-owls from Cimarron and Texas counties and near Elkhart in Morton County, Kansas, were plotted (see map). Data were obtained from Marshall (*loc. cit.*); from specimens at the University of Oklahoma Museum of Zoology (UOMZ) and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania; from the G. M. Sutton Summary of Bird Records (at the UOMZ); and from my own observations. All but one of the specimens were identified by J. T. Marshall, Jr. and G. M. Sutton.

The Eastern Screech-Owl has been collected in Oklahoma as far west as Guymon in Texas County. A specimen and recordings from near Elkhart, Kansas, are also of *O. asio* (Marshall, *loc. cit.*). In Cimarron County, only specimens and sightings of *O. kennicottii aikeni* (formerly *O. asio aikeni*, a subspecies of the Southwest) are known — all from northwestern or north central parts of the county. No specimen or sighting of either species has been recorded from the western half of Texas County or in eastern and southern Cimarron County. A gap of only about 35 miles along the Cimarron River apparently occurs in the distributions of the two species (see map). A specimen of *O. asio maxwelliae*, however, was obtained near Tascosa, Oldham County, Texas (Marshall, *loc. cit.*), 95 miles south of Keyes, Cimarron County, Oklahoma.

Positive field identification of these species is difficult, except by voice. The primary song of the Eastern Screech-Owl is typically a descending, quav-



Map of Cimarron and Texas counties, Oklahoma, and contiguous region, showing locations of specimen and sight records for Eastern and Western screech-owls (E = Eastern Screech-Owl; W = Western Screech-Owl).

ering, tremolant whinny; the secondary song is a long trill given on the same note and usually lasting more than four seconds. In the Western Screech-Owl, the primary song is a simple series of short whistle notes often described as sounding like a "bouncing ball." I have heard many Western Screech-Owls in Arizona give a simple series of only six to eight notes, each note closer in time to its predecessor, the entire song lasting only about two seconds. The secondary song is a more complicated double trill. Series of hoots and yaps are occasionally given (primarily by immature birds) which do not fit the patterns above, but are still suggestive of a screech-owl (pers. observ.).

The cover photo shows a typically plumaged Western Screech-Owl which I banded at Black Mesa State Park in Cimarron County, Oklahoma on 25 November 1978. I had heard a screech-owl calling in that vicinity on the evening prior to this bird's capture. The most useful field mark is the blackish bill which may be white-tipped. In eastern races, the culmen is usually pale greenish or greenish yellow, with horn coloration invading from the sides. *O. kennicottii* is very gray and heavily marked above and below; the species does not have a red phase. The ground color of the plumage is typically gray, but individuals may also be buffy gray. In contrast, the three *O. asio* specimens I examined from Texas County are among the palest in the Oklahoma collection, all showing a conspicuous white patch on the venter. This is typical of birds from western Kansas and eastern Colorado which are the palest among the Eastern Screech-Owl races (Owens, D. F., 1963, Syst. Zool. 12:8-14). Thus, on opposite sides of the hiatus, plumages characteristic of typical individuals of these two species are different, not tending to vary toward each other.

However, geographic variation across the species' ranges may complicate identification of some individuals. *O. asio* from the main body of Oklahoma can be quite similar to *O. kennicottii*. For example, a specimen of *O. asio* from Ellis County (UOMZ 14131) found dead on 25 November 1978 approaches *O. kennicottii* closely in being very gray. Also, two of the five Western Screech-Owls I examined from Oklahoma show buffy gray in the plumage. Differences in the crossbarring on the breast and belly feathers are given as characters of some potential in differentiating these two species (Marshall, *loc. cit.*; Roberson, D., 1983, Birding 15:118-119); yet, the crossbarring on 15 of the 54 gray phase Eastern Screech-Owls in the Oklahoma collection resembles that of Westerns closely. Two of the five Western Screech-Owls examined are indistinguishable from Easterns, based on these characters alone. The Oklahoma specimens of *O. kennicottii* differ from the Eastern Screech-Owls in the Oklahoma series most consistently in the pale gray speckling on the crown and posterior forehead; these small spots are much buffier in all the *O. asio* examined. This, however, is a minor character that may not be consistent across the species' ranges. Thus, the identification of many individuals, based upon plumage alone, may be tenuous without comparing them directly with a series of specimens.

L. F. Vancamp and C. J. Henny (1975, N. Amer. Fauna 71:1-65) evaluated dispersal of Eastern Screech-Owls banded as nestlings in northern Ohio; most

dispersed less than 20 miles, but about 6% dispersed farther than predicted by a Poisson distribution model — up to 185 miles. Considering the short distance separating the two species in the Oklahoma panhandle, it is possible that some individuals immigrate to opposite sides of this hiatus. Thus, range may not be the ultimate determinant of species identification in this group.

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GENERAL NOTES

Ruddy Shelduck collected in McClain County, Oklahoma. — I often hunt ducks from my blind built next to a beaver (*Castor canadensis*) lodge on the shore of a farm pond 8 miles south of Washington, McClain County, central Oklahoma. My decoys are usually set amid dense tangles of Eurasian milfoil (*Myriophyllum* sp.) in shallow water fronting the blind. At 1000 on 30 October 1982 (sky clear, winds calm), a lone waterfowl approached my decoys low from the north. Because of its large size, dark body, and whitish head and wings, I at first took the bird to be a goose of some kind — possibly a hybrid or an immature Snow or Blue Goose (*Chen caerulescens*). Equipped only with a duck call, I began to make vigorous feeding chatters and "hail" calls. The strange bird set its wings and sailed straight toward me, but did not afford a view of its profile. Three times I shot at it, hitting it at least twice. It flew out and circled back. Then I realized that I had never before seen a duck or goose remotely resembling this one, even though I am an experienced hunter. When it passed near my blind again, I shot the bird and my dog retrieved it. I still had no idea as to its identity.

When I returned home, I checked my references and soon found a picture that closely matched the strange bird in *The waterfowl of the world* (Delacour, J., 1954-1964, 4 vols., Country Life, London). It was a Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*), an Old World species that breeds across the south of Eurasia from southern Spain to southwestern China and winters in the south part of this range to the Nile Valley, India, and southern China; it is "occasional" in Britain (Scott, P., 1957, A coloured key to the wildfowl of the world, The Wildfowl Trust, Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, England, p. 44; photo, p. 45).

The specimen, a male in slightly worn plumage, was prepared by C. S. Wood and deposited in the University of Oklahoma Museum of Zoology (UOMZ 17796). It weighed 1140 grams and was slightly fat. The plumage of neck, breast and sides was in heavy molt, but the rectrices and remiges were hardly worn. None of the several waterfowl breeders contacted in central Oklahoma nor the Oklahoma City Zoo was aware of an escape, but neither this fact nor the bird's apparent wild state precluded that possibility. Two other species of Eurasian waterfowl have been seen in Oklahoma recently: the Baikal Teal (*Anas formosa*) on 12 March 1981 in Major County (Scheider, F. G., 1982, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 15:29-30), and the Garganey (*Anas querquedula*) in Custer County 15-18 May 1981 (Klett, E. V., 1982, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 15:9-10), and possibly in Roger Mills County on 2 May 1979 (Ross, R., 1982, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 15:7-8). — James B. Mense, *1033 Mobile Circle, Norman, Oklahoma 73071, 25 February, 1983.*