

A SNOWY OWL IN COMANCHE COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY J. MICHAEL MORGAN

Public Service Company's Comanche Station cooling lake 7 miles southeast of Lawton in Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma, is a natural oasis for a variety of migrating waterbirds. As we drove past the south end of this 200-acre lake at 1000 on 28 February 1977, three of my driver's education students and I were startled to see a huge white bird standing on the earthen dam only 60 feet away. When we stopped for a better look, the bird flew southward across the road behind us for about 200 yards, landing near some concrete rubble in an overgrazed pasture. We could tell that it was an owl, but were not certain of the species. Approximately an hour later, three other students and I returned and watched the owl for several moments through 20× binoculars. Because of its great size, striking white color, the absence of "horns" (as in the Great Horned Owl, *Bubo virginianus*), and the fact that the bird persistently kept to the ground, we concluded that it was a Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*), a Far Northern species that rarely visits Oklahoma in winter (see Shackford, J.S., 1975, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 8:31).

Jack D. Tyler, Daniel L. Stephenson, and Janet M. and Louis E. McGee found the owl in the same spot between 1750 and 1900. Several photos of the bird taken by Stephenson and Louis McGee that day are on file in the Cameron University Museum of Zoology (CUMZ 896). When the photographers flushed the owl, it flew northeastward to the top of a roadside telephone pole just south of the lake, where it remained for perhaps 15 minutes. At dusk (1900), it suddenly pitched downward from this lofty perch, flapped a few times, glided directly across to the far side of the lake, and presently landed on a partially submerged fencepost. Scores of ducks and American Coots (*Fulica americana*) in its path were incited to pandemonium.

Except for its noticeably white throat and head, the owl showed heavy dark ventral barring. This is characteristic of young birds in first winter feather and of adult females; adult males are much whiter (Bent, A. C., 1937, Life histories of North American birds, Bull. U.S. Natl. Mus. 167, pp. 363-4).

Whitewashings were plenteous at the rubble pile, where we found six regurgitated pellets and the wing and scattered remains of a Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). The pellets ranged from 1.3 to 12.2 grams in weight, and the largest three contained remains of a large bird, probably a Mallard. From two of the other pellets we recovered the remains of cotton rats (*Sigmodon hispidus*).

On 1 March, at about 0900, several persons got good looks at the owl at a place several hundred yards southeast of the rubble pile. These included Janet M. McGee, F. Elise Smith, Carroll and Velma Ridgway, and me. Later that same day, the Snowy Owl was observed for the final time by Danny J. McClung and Mike K. Clemons.

The winter of 1976-1977 was unusually severe. On 31 January 1977, there was, for the first time on record, snow in every one of the contiguous 48 United States (Canby, T. Y., 1977, Natl. Geogr. Mag. 152(6):809). Late on the evening of 25 February, a cold front swept through Lawton, causing the temperature to plummet from 73° to 47°F (Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge records). When I visited the lake approximately a week prior to 28 February, I did not

see the owl. It seems probable, therefore, that the great bird was ushered in by the cold front.

This first Comanche County record is also the southernmost for the state. Only one other Snowy Owl was seen so late in winter: on 11 March 1967, R. H. Stratton discovered one at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, northwestern Oklahoma (Shackford, 1975, *op. cit.*).

1005 NW 75TH STREET, LAWTON, OKLAHOMA 73505, 19 JANUARY 1978.

Laughing Gull in Tulsa, Oklahoma.—On 15 October 1984, between 0920 and 0945, we observed a bird that we believed to be a Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) at Lake Yahola in Mohawk Park, located in northeast Tulsa, Oklahoma. The sky was mostly cloudy, temperature 56°F, and wind northwest at approximately 25 to 30 miles per hour. As we casually watched several Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) circling above a gravel bar on the east side of the lake, we became aware of one dark-backed gull with long narrow wings, the black wingtips showing no white. Its manner of flight was almost tern-like and several times it swooped down, picked up a small fish, and ate it in flight. After bathing and preening for most of 10 minutes, the gull walked to a drier area on the bar near five or six Ring-billed Gulls and one Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*). From approximately 75 feet away we studied the strange gull through our 25× telescopes, comparing it with the others. The Franklin's Gull was in winter plumage, and its black half-hood extended from eye to eye across the back of its head.

The following notes we made at the time: "Narrow-winged gull, dark grayish mantle and inner wings. Long black triangles on wingtips with no white "windows" and no white bar across wing at base of primaries. No black or gray half-hood as on the Franklin's Gull, the neck obviously longer and the body of more slender proportions. Ring-bills larger and heavier bodied. The bill black and sturdy, turning downward at tip and somewhat longer than the Franklin's Gull's stubby bill. Legs blackish and longer than Franklin's. Head and neck white, sprinkled with flecks of grayish brown. White eye-crescents not as prominent as Franklin's, the eye bordered by smudgy gray area that faded to white behind the eye. In flight white trailing edges of wings, white tail with 3 or 4 remnants of black tail band . . ." We felt certain that we had correctly identified this bird, but having no field guides with us to check intermediate gull plumages, and finding no one at the nature center to share our observations or to loan us a book, we drove home for our own. When we returned, a fisherman had waded out to the spot where the three gull species had been, and all were dispersed. Only a few King-bills remained to fly over the far reaches of the lake.

We judged the gull to have been in its second winter plumage, fairly well pictured in the National Geographic Society's field guide to the birds of North America (1983, Wash., D.C., pp. 145, 160). Of several publications consulted, the most complete treatments of the intermediate plumages of *Larus atricilla* and *L. pipixcan* were found in Volume 3 of *The birds of the Western Palearctic* (Cramp, S., and K. E. L. Simmons, 1983, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, U. K.).—Kenneth and Elizabeth Hayes, 5307 East 27th Place, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74114, 16 December 1984.

A xanthochroistic male Purple Finch.—On 13 February 1978, Mrs. Jimmy E. (Gunter) Anderson called to tell me of an unusual bird at her feeder in Cushing, Payne County, Oklahoma. She described the bird as resembling an adult male Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*) except that its plumage was bright yellow in those places where the normal color should have been rosy.

The next morning, Berniece Frichot, Anderson and I observed the oddly colored bird in a hackberry (*Celtis* sp.) not far from the feeder. All of us noticed that its head, nape, and throat were "orange-yellow," its rump "buffy yellow" (color names from Chromatic Hexagon in Palmer, R. S., ed., 1962, Handbook of North American birds, Vol. 1, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, Connecticut, insert following p. 4). Otherwise, the coloration was normal — back brown, flanks with light streaking, and wings brownish. Several times we had the opportunity to compare it with typical males as they fed nearby.

Desmond Isted, Charlene Anderson, James Brooks, and Robert Farris also studied this unusual finch at the Anderson feeder on 16 February and several photographs were taken that day. On 19 February, as Elizabeth and Kenneth Hayes, Eleanor Sieg, and Robert Farris viewed the bird in bright sunlight, they detected a slight wash of rust on its dull golden throat.

Color aberrations are most commonly seen in the form of albinism or melanism. In birds, these abnormalities may be the result of atypical feather structure, anomalous pigment expression, or some combination of both. When yellow color appears, the term applied is xanthochroism. A detailed discussion of this complex but intriguing subject was given by J. P. Hailman in a recent issue of the Florida Field Naturalist (Vol. 12, pp. 36-38, 1984). J. K. Terres described it as follows: "Xanthochroism (xan-THOK-row-ism) is an abnormal yellow of the plumage, very rare in the wild, but more common among captive parrots. It is thought to result from the loss of dark pigment (melanin) in the feathers which allows the yellow carotenoid pigment to dominate over the light-produced and reflected blue" (1980, Audubon Society encyclopedia of North American birds, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 98). Even though xanthochroism among Purple Finches is mentioned infrequently in the literature (see Blake, C. H., 1955, Notes on the eastern Purple Finch, Bird-Banding 26:102-103), banders occasionally encounter "female plumaged" individuals (i.e., females of any age or first winter males) with yellow rumps and/or scattered yellow crown feathers among populations of Purple Finches wintering in Oklahoma (W. A. Carter, pers. comm.). Most published accounts refer to birds exhibiting patches of yellow feathers rather than cases where the male's "rosy" coloration is wholly supplanted with yellow, as described above. The plumage variation reported in this note thus appears to be not only a first for the state, but also a very rare occurrence.—Deloris Isted, 2950 Woodward Boulevard, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74114, 14 April 1978.

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