

A NEW BIRD FOR OKLAHOMA: ROYAL TERN

BY JOHN G. NEWELL AND DIANE M. NEWELL



ROYAL TERN

Top photo taken near Lake Hefner Ranger Station, Oklahoma City, on 4 January 1989 by John S. Shackford. Bottom photo taken at Kid's Lake near Lake Hefner, Oklahoma City, on 8 January 1989 by Diane M. Newell. Note large orange bill, white forehead, short black crest and size, compared to Ring-billed Gulls.

About mid-morning on New Year's Day, 1989, while watching Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) near the south shore of Lake Hefner, Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma, I (JGN) noticed a large tern resting with them. The tern had a modest black crest on its head behind the eye. The anterior portion of its cap was white and the heavy bill orange. I immediately recognized it as a Royal Tern (*Sterna maxima*) from personal experience with the species along the Gulf Coast, where it is fairly common. The birds were in a gravel parking lot near the Lake Hefner Ranger Station and boat docks. A little later I brought my wife Dorothy to see the bird and she also had good views of it.

Between 3 and 11 January the tern was seen four additional dates in the same parking lot: on 3 January by Jeff Webster and his wife Tina; on 4 January by John S. Shackford, who photographed it (Top cover photo) as I kept the tern alert on this chilly morning, rather than letting it tuck its bill under its scapular feathers; later that same day by John S. Tomer, Steve Metz and Jim Hoffman; on 5 January by Joseph A. Grzybowski and me during mid-afternoon; and on 11 January I saw it again near noon.

About 1330 on 8 January the authors found the tern with numerous Ring-billed Gulls at Kid's Lake, near the southeast shore of Lake Hefner and about 1¼ miles east of the Ranger Station. Here DMN was able to get good photographs of it as it loitered with the gulls (Bottom cover photo). The next day I again found the tern at Kid's Lake; it was resting on the grass as it preened, apparently in good condition. On 19 January, I found it resting in the same area with about 100 Ring-billed Gulls.

To our knowledge, 19 January was the last day that the tern was seen. The weather was cold that day with strong north winds and icy conditions. More gulls were arriving daily, including some Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*). On 24 January 1989 JGN discovered a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), apparently the same bird which has appeared each winter at Lake Hefner since 3 February 1984. Sometime after 19 January, the Royal Tern possibly moved southward with migrating gulls, for JGN could not locate it on 21 or 24 January.

In the sixth edition of the AOU Check-list of North American Birds (1983, Allen Press, Lawrence, Kansas, p. 228), habitat for the Royal Tern during the non-breeding season is given as "... seacoasts, lagoons and estuaries, rarely on lakes ..." According to Chandler S. Robbins (1983, Birds of North America, Golden Press, New York, p. 154), the Royal Tern "is quite common but is strictly limited to salt water." That this bird was seen for 19 days near fresh water in central Oklahoma, apparently in good condition and moving back and forth between two areas almost two miles apart, is remarkable: the nearest oceanic habitat to Oklahoma is almost 500 miles southward on the coast of Texas. The few inland records for that state are all within 200 miles of the coast (Arnold, K. A., ed., 1984, Checklist of the birds of Texas, 2nd ed., Texas Ornithol. Soc., Austin, pp. 52-53).

Each time we saw the tern it was in the company of Ring-billed Gulls. Although we saw it fly, we never saw the tern feeding. Its droppings, however, indicated that it was obtaining adequate food.

This is the first verified record of the Royal Tern for Oklahoma. There is no previous sight record for the state, nor has it been listed as hypothetical prior to this discovery.

8304 LAKEAIRE DR., OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73132, 26 OCTOBER 1989.

Extraordinary aggregation of White-faced Ibises at a playa lake in Texas County, Oklahoma. — While traveling eastward across the Oklahoma Panhandle on State Highway 3 during the afternoon of 16 August 1988, I encountered a remarkable number of White-faced Ibises (*Plegadis chihi*) at a recently flooded playa lake located 6.4 km (4 mi.) east of Hardesty in eastern Texas County. They were brought to my attention when a flock of 50 took wing and flew across the highway only 10 m high. They had been stirred into flight by the noisy passage of a large diesel-powered truck. When I glanced around, I realized that the birds in flight were but a fraction of all the ibises present. For more than two hours, I identified and counted the waterbirds at this inundated low area. So numerous and restless were the ibises that they proved very difficult to count, but I finally arrived at a figure of 290 birds.

The highway and a north-south section line road divided the water-filled depression into four quadrants of variable size ranging from 100 to perhaps 10,000 square meters, totalling approximately 5 acres. Only the smallest had appreciable mudflats; the others were deeper and occasionally interrupted by stalky dead vegetation, particularly near shore.

Coincidentally, John S. Shackford, who passed these playas near dusk that same day saw an estimated 110 ibises. He also noted that much of the vegetation protruding from the ponds was Curly Dock (*Rumex crispus*) that had gone to seed. He felt that the seed heads, being reddish-brown and individually about the size of an ibis, may have acted as decoys to help lure ibises from the air.

I felt confident that I had witnessed an unprecedented concentration of ibises for Oklahoma. It greatly exceeded my personal prior maximum of 45 to 50 which I saw on 9 August 1985 at Optima Reservoir, just 6.4 km (4 mi.) to the northwest. According to data in the George M. Sutton Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records ([1982], Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman) the largest reported group of White-faced Ibis through 1981 was "about 60" seen at the Great Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge on 23 September 1959 by C. L. Ward and R. J. Hitch. Another remarkable record was of "about 100" ibises observed on 9 and 16 September 1978 at Waurika Lake in Jefferson County by Rod Smith (J. D. Tyler field notes). I believe it rather likely that several migrating flocks arriving separately may have been represented in this vast aggregation. Moreover, the presence in fall of flocks totalling 300 White-faced Ibises over Hudspeth and El Paso counties, Texas, was characterized as "astounding" (F. C. Williams, 1986, Amer. Birds 40:134), in spite of that area being more than 339 km (210 mi.) farther west than Texas County. — W. Marvin Davis, 308 Lewis Lane, Oxford, Mississippi 38655, 26 September 1989.