

THE BLACK SKIMMER IN OKLAHOMA

By Mitchell Oliphant

During midmorning of 3 June 1991, while scanning the mud flats at Lake Overholser, Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma, with my 15-60 power spotting scope I found, coursing over the water, a gull-sized bird with a distinct black dorsum and white underparts. Back and forth it flew on long narrow wings just above the water's surface in front of a low cofferdam at the north end of the lake. Its outsized bill was orange basally, but black toward the tip. Closer scrutiny revealed that the lower mandible, decidedly longer than the upper, was largely submerged when the bird "skimmed" the surface of the lake. I quickly concluded that this strange visitor was none other than a Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*), whose breeding range is normally confined to the coasts of the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico from Massachusetts south to Florida and west to Texas (American Ornithologists' Union, 1983, *The A. O. U. check-list of North American birds*, 6th ed., p. 239).



BLACK SKIMMER

Photo taken by Jim Vicars at Lake Overholser in Oklahoma City on 7 June 1991.

I observed the skimmer for perhaps 15 minutes and noticed that it frequently rested on a low sandbar near the cofferdam. Anxious to share my splendid discovery with others, I telephoned John Newell. Soon, he arrived with his wife, Dorothy, and Thula Parkhill. Altogether, we observed the skimmer for at least an hour, thrilling to its graceful, almost effortless flight as it fished near shore. Hubert Harris was fortunate to happen by and also have the opportunity to admire this highly unusual bird.

Ironically, it was Newell who discovered Oklahoma's first Black Skimmer 24 years before *at this identical location!* This was on 14 May 1967, when one was studied during a six-hour period by Newell, T.K. Shires, Nelson Hall, Herb Chezem, Ernest and Betty

Hicock and Ray and Joyce Tillerson (John Newell, pers. comm.; Sutton, G.M., 1974, *A check-list of Oklahoma birds*, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman).

During the intervening years, only one other *Rhynchops* is on record for the state. At Stanley Draper Lake in Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, several observers, including Grace E. Ray, Frances Peters, Warren D. Harden and George M. Sutton, saw one repeatedly on 1, 2 and 3 October 1971. On the latter date, Sutton collected the bird, which proved to be an adult female (UOMZ 7211; Ray, G.E., 1972, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 4:34).

The skimmer lingered at Lake Overholser for six days, being last recorded on 8 June. During this period, many other observers saw it, including Esther Key, Jim and Nancy Vicars, Jeff and Tina Webster, Ernest Wilson, Sam Moore, Jim Norman, Jeri McMahon and Vera Jennings. Most of the bird's time was spent loitering along the aforementioned sandbar. Here it was occasionally in the company of Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) and Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*). At intervals during the day, however, it would lift up and slowly skim back and forth across the north end of the lake. Whether or not it was catching many fish was not immediately apparent. The bird was photographed by me on 3 June and subsequently by Jim Vicars (cover photo).

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GENERAL NOTES

Common Loon at Quartz Mountain State Park in summer. —During the early afternoon of 14 July 1989, Tammy K. James and I discovered a large, light-colored bird swimming in a cove of Lake Altus-Lugert in Quartz Mountain State Park, Greer County, southwestern Oklahoma. It sat low in the water with its head tilted slightly upward. Examination through binoculars revealed the bird's grayish dorsum and white throat and chest. Its bill was gray. I tentatively identified it as a Common Loon (*Gavia immer*), a species that I had had considerable experience with in northern Minnesota and Wisconsin.

We observed the bird again at 1430 the same afternoon. A Bushnell Spacemaster II spotting scope with 25 X eyepiece allowed us excellent close-up views. Its gray sides, and neck and the dark area on its head above the eyes confirmed our earlier identification and precluded its being a Pacific Loon (*S. Pacifica*). It was a Common Loon in basic (winter) plumage. For nearly 25 minutes, we watched it swim slowly about near shore, occasionally stretching one leg completely out of the water.

Between 0940 and 1010 on 21 July we noted the loon in the same location. Again, it was preening and loafing in a lackadaisical manner. I took several photographs (on file at Cameron University), using a 200mm lens. After this date, however, the loon was not seen again.

The cove that the loon favored lay between and south of two granite hills in the south end of the lake known as Twin Peaks. Because these prominences protected the cove from wind, the water there tended to be relatively calm. This very feature, however, made the cove a popular area for boating. The loon was never present when boats were, and noise and human activity may have eventually forced it out of the park.

The Common Loon is a rare migrant in spring and an occasional fall migrant through