

## OKLAHOMA OWLS

Oklahoma is blessed with a richly diverse owl fauna. Ten of 18 species listed for the conterminous United States in the most recent American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American birds (1983), have been recorded in the state. Three of these, the Western Screech-Owl (*Otus kennicottii*), Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*), and Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) are only rarely seen. A paper here-in reports on a chance encounter with the latter in the Black Mesa country and is complemented by an exceptional photograph (Fig. 1). Every dozen years or so, one or two Snowy Owls find their way to Oklahoma from the Far North, creating a flurry of excitement for bird students. The winter just past was such a year. Insofar as is known, the Western Screech-Owl barely reaches the state along riparian woodlands at the west end of the Panhandle.

The Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*) and the Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) sojourn in the Sooner State during the colder months. Until a few years ago, there was only a single old nest record for the Short-eared, but three recent ones are documented in this *Bulletin*. Likewise, the Long-eared Owl breeds here, though rarely; another paper in this issue describes the first successful nest for northeastern Oklahoma.

Wide-ranging owls that breed regularly in Oklahoma include the Common Barn-Owl (*Tyto alba*), Eastern Screech-Owl (*O. asio*), Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) and Barred Owl (*Strix varia*). One other, the diminutive, long-legged Burrowing Owl (*Speotyto cunicularia*), may also be resident, but there remains uncertainty as to its precise status in winter; most individuals appear to withdraw southward, but occasionally one of these not very nocturnal owls can be found even during a protracted cold spell.

## NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL



Fig. 1. Photo taken by Sharon K. Meisenzahl on 1 January 1994. This small owl was in a ponderosa pine 4 miles south of Kenton in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.

Most species of owls show specific habitat preferences. The Short-eared is found in undisturbed prairie, the Barred within dense deciduous forests, the Long-eared and Northern Saw-whet prefer conifer stands, the Burrowing inhabits prairie dog towns, the Snowy hunts flat open country, and the Common Barn-Owl usually seeks man-made structures in open regions. Screech-owls ordinarily live in deciduous woods, but will often take up residence around human habitations in nest boxes. The ubiquitous Great Horned Owl observes few limitations of habitat. Two notes in this *Bulletin* illustrate the adaptability of this species, whose food habits are as catholic as its habitat use. On occasion, it takes such unlikely prey as hawks, house cats, other owls and even striped skunks.

These skillful predators are uniquely adapted for stealthy nocturnal hunting and daily consume enormous quantities of potentially deleterious rodents, rabbits and insects. All are protected by law, and deservedly so. Their haunts and secretive habits make owls difficult to monitor, hence some species may not be as rare as available records indicate. Observers should be aware that much remains to be learned about these fascinating birds. This issue is dedicated to them — *The Editor*.

## NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL IN CIMARRON COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY

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One of only three small stands of ponderosa pines (*Pinus ponderosa*) known in Oklahoma towers above the rim of a small canyon 4 miles south of Kenton in Cimarron County, at the far west end of the Panhandle. During several previous Audubon Christmas Bird Counts at Black Mesa (Kenton), the Shanes had not taken the time to explore this grove, despite the fact that it lay within their designated area of the official count circle. These pines are located a few hundred meters north-east of the Lawrence Regnier ranch house, which has long been a cynosure for bird observers. The Shanes had earlier planned to investigate this copse of trees during the 1993 count (held on 1 January 1994), which they did.

Around 1000, while searching the ponderosa trunks for fresh sapsucker holes, Tom Shane discovered an adult Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) perched quietly toward the end of a pine bough approximately eight feet high. A moderate amount of whitewash on a limb four feet below the owl had revealed the bird's whereabouts.

The Meisenzahls returned later in the day, together with numerous other Christmas Count participants, to try to obtain a picture of the bird. Photographing it from the ground proved difficult, because from every position the dense rosettes of pine needles obstructed the little owl. Finally, by sitting on her husband's shoulders, Sharon Meisenzahl managed to secure a photograph (Fig. 1).

As is often reported in the literature, this owl is quite tame and we approached it to within a few feet. It moved only once during the entire day, turning on its perch from facing northeast in the morning to southwest that afternoon.

Baumgartner and Baumgartner (1992:413) list only eight records for this owl in their "Stragglers in Oklahoma" appendix. Of relevance are three records from Texas County: on 29 November 1933 a specimen was collected near Eva; another