

HEERMANN'S GULL: A NEW BIRD FOR OKLAHOMA

By JOHN S. TOMER

On the morning of 25 August 1979, while James C. Hoffman and I were birding along the Cimarron River Arm of Keystone Reservoir in Creek County, northeastern Oklahoma, we came upon a flock of about 200 gulls at rest on a sandbar 250 yards from one end of the State Highway 48 bridge that crosses the Arm. Training our telescopes on the flock, hoping to see an early Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*), or possibly a California Gull (*L. californicus*), we decided that all were Ringbills (*L. delawarensis*).

Suddenly the gulls took flight. Rather than moving to another part of the reservoir, however, they circled upward in a tight flock, among them a very dark individual that had not been part of the resting flock. The dark-all-over bird was about the size of the Ringbills; it did not seem to differ much from them in behavior; but when, within five minutes or so, the gulls



HEERMANN'S GULL

An immature bird photographed by Hannah Bass along the Arkansas River below the Keystone Reservoir dam on 8 December 1979. The paleness of the basal half of the bill shows well in this picture.

had risen to perhaps 500 feet above the lake, the dark bird left the flock, flew in our direction, and presently was about 200 feet directly overhead. Now, looking closely, we perceived that its underparts were wholly without light markings on the belly, flanks, and under tail coverts and that the tail was rounded. We decided that it was, in other words, a uniformly dark gull. But to which species did it belong? Next day, when I returned, hoping to see the puzzling bird again, I could not find it.

On the morning of 4 December, Eleanor Sieg, John Dickerson, Hazel Ekholm, Alice Hensy, Hannah Bass, and several other members of the Tulsa Audubon Society (TAS) discovered a similarly dark-all-over gull among the several Ringbills and Bonaparte's Gulls (*L. philadelphia*) that were feeding in the water below the reservoir's dam in Tulsa County about 8½ miles east of the aforementioned bridge. No one felt at all confident in naming the species to which the bird belonged, for it was unlike any gull that had been listed for the Tulsa area.

The moot gull remained in the vicinity of the dam for several weeks. Many observers saw it clearly. Robert J. Farris and Hannah Bass photographed it (see halftone illustrations). On 5 December, Elizabeth Hayes tape-recorded its calls. After consulting all available guides, everyone agreed that the puzzling bird had to be a Heermann's Gull (*L. heermanni*) in the dark plumage of its first year. Our TAS Recorder, Elizabeth Hayes, sent to George M. Sutton, State Recorder for the Oklahoma Ornithological Society, a full report on all that she and the many other observers had seen.

The report convinced Dr. Sutton that the dark gull was of a species not



HEERMANN'S GULL

Photographed by Hannah Bass along the Arkansas River below the Keystone Reservoir dam on 8 December 1979. The pale basal half of the bill does not show in this picture, but the darkness of the legs and feet does.

heretofore recorded in Oklahoma. It did not, however, completely convince him that the bird was *Larus heermanni*. He had, in 1971, visited the Galápagos Islands, where he had seen the endemic Lava Gull (*L. fuliginosus*), a species whose every plumage-stage between the natal down and the adult resembles the first-year Heermann's, so he could not help suspecting that our Tulsa bird might be an immature Lava Gull. His suspicion was, admittedly, strengthened by the fact that he had recently identified an Oklahoma specimen of another bird he had seen much of on the Galápagos, a Giant Frigatebird (*Aquila minor*), whose capture at Perry, Oklahoma, on 3 November, 1975 had given the continental United States its first record for that spectacular species (see Heller, 1977, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 10: 9-10). Sutton's carefully considered advice: Collect the dark gull if possible, lest there continue to be doubts as to what it actually had been.

Early in March 1980, it was obvious that some of our wintering gulls had begun to leave us. On 8 March, with the permission of Cliff N. Hays and J. Arlyn Hendricks, respectively Project Manager and Park Ranger of the U.S. Corps of Engineers, I collected the dark gull. Dr. Sutton prepared the specimen, finding it to be a not very fat female (UOMZ 16130, weight 456 grams). D. Scott Wood borrowed from the U.S. National Museum a



HEERMANN'S GULL

Photographed by Robert J. Farris, along the Arkansas River below the Keystone Reservoir dam on 12 December 1979. What appear to be markings on the underwings are actually light-struck parts of feathers.

first-year specimen of Lava Gull; the remarkable similarity of our bird to the Lava Gull was perceived by all who compared them; and the Oklahoma bird was pronounced *Larus heermanni*. The specimen's wing measured 324 mm., the tail 129, the culmen 39. The bill colors of the freshly shot bird were close to those shown in Dwight's classic work on the gulls of the world (Dwight, 1925, Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist. 52, Plate 13, Fig. 3).

Heermann's Gull breeds along the Pacific coast south of the United States on "islands of the Gulf of California . . . and of the coast of Mexico . . . migrating northward after the breeding season to California and . . . southern British Columbia" (Dwight, *op. cit.*, p. 147). It winters along the coast "from Oregon to Guatemala (San José, Chiapam)" (AOU Check-list, 1957, p. 229). For almost a century after its discovery (in 1832 by Cassin), it was unreported from the continental interior, but on 20 March 1919 an adult male "in breeding plumage" was found dead on Pinos Altos Mountain near Silver City, southwestern New Mexico (Bailey, Birds of New Mexico, New Mexico Dep. Game & Fish, Albuquerque, p. 293); on 13 November 1955, one was seen along the Colorado River "about 30 miles above Yuma," in southwestern Arizona (Phillips, Marshall, & Monson, 1964, The birds of Arizona, Univ. Arizona Press, Tucson, p. 39); on 7 and 27 November 1970, the species was seen near Tucson, southern Arizona (Huber, 1971, Auk 88: 929); and within recent years there have been many scattered sightings from inland areas far from the Pacific coast. Into Arizona, where the species has been sighted "more than a dozen" times, "a few now wander . . . each year" (Witzeman, Hubbard, & Kaufman, 1977, Amer. Birds 31: 359; 1978, Amer. Birds 32: 241). In Nevada there have been at least three sightings (Kingery, 1977, Amer. Birds 31: 205), in Texas one sighting (Williams, 1976, Amer. Birds 30: 736); in Michigan one sighting (Maley, 1980, Amer. Birds 34: 343), in Ohio one sighting (Kleen, 1980, Amer. Birds 34: 278).

Are all of these extralimital records merely a result of increased attention and better reporting, or has Heermann's Gull — for reasons beyond our understanding — been obliged recently to seek food and shelter away from the Pacific Ocean?

5911 EAST 46TH ST., TULSA, OKLAHOMA 74135. 14 FEBRUARY 1981.

AN IMPORTANT MARSHY POND IN KINGFISHER COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

By JOHN S. SHACKFORD

About 4 miles southeast of Dover, Kingfisher County, central Oklahoma, and not far from the Cimarron River, is an extensive low-lying area that has held enough water during the past two or three summers to permit the growth of a good stand of bulrushes and cattails. On 25 May 1980, I waded around this marshy area, finding two nests of the Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*), one with 10 eggs, the other with 1, and four nests of the American Coot (*Fulica americana*) containing 2, 6, 9 and 9 eggs. A colony of Great-tailed Grackles (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) had established itself

among the bulrushes and cattails and in a willow close by. Of the 15-20 grackle nests, a few in the bulrushes and cattails appeared to have been deserted, presumably because of recent heavy rains and high water. To my surprise I flushed a Purple Gallinule (*Porphyryla martinica*), whose yellow legs, purplish blue head, and shiny green back I saw clearly.

On 16 June I visited the area again, this time accompanied by Warren D. Harden. We found 24 coot nests (containing 1 to 10 eggs, some of them pipping) and a brood of five very young coots; four Pied-billed Grebe nests holding 1, 5, 6, and 10 eggs, and two grebe broods, each of several small chicks; a nest of the Common Gallinule (*Gallinula chloropus*) holding 8 eggs, from which we flushed an adult bird; and a nest of the Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*) with 2 eggs. In the bulrushes and cattails, which were sturdier than they had been on 25 May, there seemed to be several grackle nests that I had not seen before. We did not flush the Purple Gallinule again.

We saw no evidence that a population of predators had moved into the area. We saw no snakes, turtles, or fishes, and found no owl pellets. The only falconiform birds that we saw were two Mississippi Kites (*Ictinia mississippiensis*).

On 10 July 1 I returned to the marsh with Wayne Easley. We found only two occupied coot nests (5 and 6 eggs) and a brood of 7 young coots, though judging from coot noises coming from the vegetation we decided that there were other young in the vicinity; one Pied-billed Grebe nest (5 eggs, possibly abandoned) and a brood of at least two chicks; 5 young in the Least Bittern nest that Harden and I had found on 16 June, and a second Least Bittern nest with 4 eggs; and 40-50 Great-tailed Grackle nests (eggs to nearly fledged young). We saw 15-20 Little Blue Herons (*Florida caerulea*), a few Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), and one small turtle.

On 12 July Ernest E. Wilson visited the area, noting that the young Great-tailed Grackles, particularly those in poorly shaded nests, were suffering from the heat (100°F.).

ROUTE 1, BOX 125, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73111, JANUARY 7, 1981.

GENERAL NOTES

Louisiana (Tricolored) Heron in northeastern Oklahoma.—On 26 May 1981, Phyllis Chapman, Goldie Scheeler, and Jerry Smith joined me in a drive to the new Copan Reservoir in the northern part of Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma. Up to that time the low-lying area above the dam had held only small, scattered ponds, but heavy rains upstream along the Caney River had caused the reservoir to fill to a depth of several feet. A heron that flew over not far from the dam was dark on the head, neck and chest, but very light on the belly. Having noted just where the bird went down, we found it perched on a stake in a marshy spot along the reservoir's edge. We observed the purplish gray of the long, thin neck and

upper parts and the contrasting white of the belly and agreed that the bird was an adult Louisiana or Tricolored Heron (*Hydranassa tricolor*). It was obviously ill at ease, perhaps because of the noisy road traffic, and soon flew off. We did not see it again.

Hydranassa tricolor has been seen several times in northeastern Oklahoma, but not heretofore in Washington County. From 31 July through 22 August 1971 it was seen in Rogers County at Oologah Reservoir — a single bird by H. W. Goard and his wife Dotty on 31 July, 1 August, and 8 August; three birds by Aline Romero, Eleanor Sieg, and Polly Keating on 16 August; and three birds by Elizabeth Hayes on 22 August. Elizabeth C. Hicks has reported seeing the species on three occasions at Hulah Reservoir in Osage County, a single bird on 29 June 1974, one on 5 October 1975, and one on 9 September 1977.—Ella Delap, 409 N. Wyandotte, Dewey, Oklahoma 74029.

Swallow-tailed Kite in Alfalfa County, Oklahoma.—At about 1000 on 1 June 1980, while I was driving along a county road about 1½ miles north of the headquarters buildings of the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma, I saw a Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*). The bird was some 20 yards east of the road, gliding slowly southward about 25 feet up over native grassland that has been largely taken over by small trees and shrubs.

I stopped the car, got out, and watched from a standing position at the roadside. The kite swung westward, almost as if curious about my car and me, moving slowly until directly overhead. The species' characteristic features — the white head and underparts and deeply forked tail — were now clearly visible. As it continued gliding slowly westward it banked slightly, exposing the black of its back and upper wing surfaces. Not while I was watching did it beat its wings.

Once across the road, the kite again headed southward. I watched it for a short time, then, hoping to show it to Ronald Sullivan, who was at refuge headquarters, I headed south. When I last saw the kite it had moved eastward back across the road and risen to about 40 feet up, but was still riding the air currents southward. When Sullivan and I returned about ten minutes later, the kite was nowhere to be seen.

According to G. M. Sutton's summary of records, this is the first Swallow-tailed Kite to have been seen in Oklahoma since the fall of 1970. On 6 September of that year John G. Newell and Nelson Hall watched one for "about five minutes" at Lake Hefner in Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma (Newell, 1971, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 4: 15-16).—John A. Kirk, Assistant Refuge Manager, Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge, Route 1, Box 76, Jet, Oklahoma 73749, 28 June 1980.

Mississippi Kite in Delaware County, Oklahoma. — At 0930 on 26 June 1981, Frederick M. Baumgartner, his wife Marguerite, Maryanne B. Pitts, and the undersigned observed a Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia*

mississippiensis) circling over wooded slopes west of the junction of Beatty Creek and Spavinaw Creek, 5 miles south of Jay, Delaware County, north-eastern Oklahoma. The bird appeared to be about 200 feet up. According to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. of Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 97), the Mississippi Kite has not heretofore been sighted within the Ozarks Region of Oklahoma; his summary of records makes clear that the species was seen on 22 and 25 May 1917 at Copan, Washington County, by A. J. B. Kirn (Nice, 1931, Birds of Oklahoma, p. 69); at Bartlesville, Washington County, on 7 October 1965 by H. Goard and his wife Dottie (Sutton, *loc. cit.*); in the vicinity of Tulsa, Tulsa County, frequently within recent years; and at Honor Heights Park in Muskogee, Muskogee County (two birds, flying) on 7 May 1965 by J. L. Norman, G. W. Dickson, and G. M. Sutton.—Roger S. Lawson and Lori A. Langston, 1207 E. Fourth St., Stillwater, Oklahoma 74074, 23 July 1981.

Dunlin in Comanche County, Oklahoma.—On 4 May 1978, at about 1100, Chris W. Cloud discovered a Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) while conducting a routine survey of avian migrants along the south shore of Public Service Company Lake 7 miles southeast of Lawton, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. The south shoreline of this man-made impoundment of some 200 acres is normally bordered by narrow mudflats that merge with the surrounding pastureland. The lake is the only body of water of appreciable size for several miles around in this open country and it naturally attracts many migrant water birds.

Shortly after noon, Cloud, his young daughter Christie, and I returned to the lake. We found the bird where it had been observed earlier, feeding among several Semipalmated Sandpipers (*C. pusilla*), Western Sandpipers (*C. mauri*), and Wilson's Phalaropes (*Steganopus tricolor*). Since this was the first known occurrence of the Dunlin in southwestern Oklahoma, I decided to collect it. The specimen (CUMZ 759), a male in almost complete breeding plumage, is now in the collection of the Cameron University Museum of Zoology in Lawton.

C. alpina is an uncommon migrant in Oklahoma. It has been recorded in spring from 27 April to 31 May, and in fall between 23 July and 27 November (Sutton, 1974, Check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 16). There are a few mid-winter records for Oklahoma and Cleveland counties.—Jack D. Tyler, *Dept. of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 15 January 1979.*

Whip-poor-will in Oklahoma City.—On 14 April 1980, teen-agers named Sutton Willard (girl) and Jay Parsons (boy), while on their way home from school, found a crippled Whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*) near their bus stop on S.E. 15th St. in Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma. They took the bird to Elizabeth Black, who cares for injured and ailing birds for the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Oklahoma City Zoo.

The Whip-poor-will's humerus was broken very close to the body. Since the wound appeared to be several days old, Mrs. Black surmised the bone had been fractured during the preceding week.

I saw the bird on 16 April. It was considerably smaller and darker than a female Chuck-will's-widow (*C. carolinensis*), another of Mrs. Black's patients. Since the Whip-poor-will's three outer pairs of rectrices were boldly tipped with white, I judged it to be a male. Mrs. Black had the damaged wing removed on 18 April. The bird survived the amputation and seemed to be faring well, but it died on 23 April.

The only other Whip-poor-will record for Oklahoma County is of one that I saw and heard myself each evening from 13 to 23 September 1964 in my yard in the northeastern part of Oklahoma City. When I first heard that bird's calls, I wondered whether some boy might be making them, but the performance was too perfect for anybody's whistling. I found the singer sitting on a telephone wire and walked up to within about 50 feet before it flew. The white of its tail showed well. As the evenings passed, I learned that it had a precise routine. Before it came to the yard it gave a low *chuck* in the oak woods back of my place. On flying in, it alighted lengthwise on the telephone cable, rested there a few minutes, then flew to a higher power line, where it perched crosswise. From there it flew out over the yard after insects, returning to the same perch after each foray. Although darkness was gathering, I had little trouble following the bird's movements. As long as I stayed fairly still, it continued to feed. A cold front on the night of 23 September apparently caused it to leave.

According to G. M. Sutton's summary of records, *Caprimulgus vociferus* has been found westward in Oklahoma to the following counties: Woods (specimen collected near Alva on 7 October 1954); Payne (specimen collected spring of 1925; Oklahoma (as above documented); Pottawatomie (male hit at night by car near Shawnee 1 July 1963); Cleveland (one heard calling 11 September 1920; remains of one found in residential part of Norman fall of 1964).—John G. Newell, 4129 N. Everest, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73111, 2 June 1980.

FROM THE EDITOR: The annual OOS photographic contest is open to anyone who is seriously interested in capturing a moment in the life of an Oklahoma bird. Pictorial contributions to knowledge frequently surpass the written word.

Here are some subjects of which no satisfactory photograph is available: fledglings of almost any species two or three days after leaving the nest (e.g., Bell's Vireo and Prairie Warbler); Starling with bill *open* as it feeds in short grass; a Mockingbird flashing the white in its wings while searching or begging for food; any species scratching with its leg *over* its wing; the exposed white at the base of the nape feathers of a White-necked Raven; the spread tail of a snipe in courtship; and a sapsucker stretching for sap wells while it maintains the same perch.—Jack D. Tyler.