

**WESTERN SCREECH-OWL: A "NEW" BIRD FOR OKLAHOMA**

BY JOSEPH A. GRZYBOWSKI

The Thirty-fourth supplement to the American Ornithologists' Union (A.O.U.) Check-list of North American birds (1982, *Suppl. to Auk* 99:9CC) recognizes the Western Screech-Owl (*Otus kennicottii*) as a species distinct from *O. asio* (now the Eastern Screech-Owl). Formerly, the eastern and western forms of the Screech Owl were given subspecific statuses under *O. asio* (A.O.U., 1957, Check-list of North American birds, Baltimore, Maryland, pp. 273-276). The current status of *O. kennicottii* provides Oklahoma with a "new" species.

A hiatus between the distributions of the Eastern and Western screech-owls apparently exists through the High Plains of the United States and



**WESTERN SCREECH-OWL**

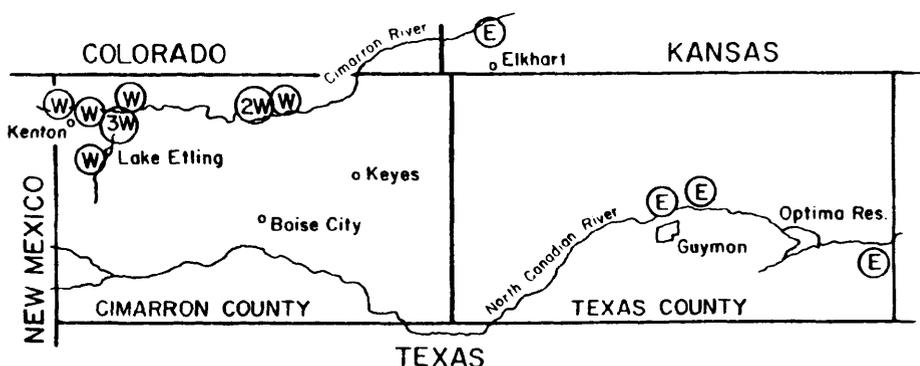
*This bird was banded 25 November 1978 at Black Mesa State Park, northwestern Cimarron County, Oklahoma. Photo by the author.*

southward into Mexico (Marshall, J. T., Jr., 1967, Monogr. West. Found. Vert. Zool. 1:1-72). This zone of separation in the southern High Plains generally follows a historical gap in the distribution of trees large enough to provide potential nesting holes for screech-owls. Zones of overlap between these species, however, occur along the Rio Grande River in the Big Bend region of Texas (Marshall, *loc. cit.*), and along the Arkansas River in southeastern Colorado, where some hybridization occurs (Marshall, pers. comm.).

Locations of specimens and sightings of screech-owls from Cimarron and Texas counties and near Elkhart in Morton County, Kansas, were plotted (see map). Data were obtained from Marshall (*loc. cit.*); from specimens at the University of Oklahoma Museum of Zoology (UOMZ) and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania; from the G. M. Sutton Summary of Bird Records (at the UOMZ); and from my own observations. All but one of the specimens were identified by J. T. Marshall, Jr. and G. M. Sutton.

The Eastern Screech-Owl has been collected in Oklahoma as far west as Guymon in Texas County. A specimen and recordings from near Elkhart, Kansas, are also of *O. asio* (Marshall, *loc. cit.*). In Cimarron County, only specimens and sightings of *O. kennicottii aikenii* (formerly *O. asio aikenii*, a subspecies of the Southwest) are known — all from northwestern or north central parts of the county. No specimen or sighting of either species has been recorded from the western half of Texas County or in eastern and southern Cimarron County. A gap of only about 35 miles along the Cimarron River apparently occurs in the distributions of the two species (see map). A specimen of *O. asio maxwelliae*, however, was obtained near Tascosa, Oldham County, Texas (Marshall, *loc. cit.*), 95 miles south of Keyes, Cimarron County, Oklahoma.

Positive field identification of these species is difficult, except by voice. The primary song of the Eastern Screech-Owl is typically a descending, quav-



Map of Cimarron and Texas counties, Oklahoma, and contiguous region, showing locations of specimen and sight records for Eastern and Western screech-owls (E = Eastern Screech-Owl; W = Western Screech-Owl).

ering, tremolant whinny; the secondary song is a long trill given on the same note and usually lasting more than four seconds. In the Western Screech-Owl, the primary song is a simple series of short whistle notes often described as sounding like a "bouncing ball." I have heard many Western Screech-Owls in Arizona give a simple series of only six to eight notes, each note closer in time to its predecessor, the entire song lasting only about two seconds. The secondary song is a more complicated double trill. Series of hoots and yaps are occasionally given (primarily by immature birds) which do not fit the patterns above, but are still suggestive of a screech-owl (pers. observ.).

The cover photo shows a typically plumaged Western Screech-Owl which I banded at Black Mesa State Park in Cimarron County, Oklahoma on 25 November 1978. I had heard a screech-owl calling in that vicinity on the evening prior to this bird's capture. The most useful field mark is the blackish bill which may be white-tipped. In eastern races, the culmen is usually pale greenish or greenish yellow, with horn coloration invading from the sides. *O. kennicottii* is very gray and heavily marked above and below; the species does not have a red phase. The ground color of the plumage is typically gray, but individuals may also be buffy gray. In contrast, the three *O. asio* specimens I examined from Texas County are among the palest in the Oklahoma collection, all showing a conspicuous white patch on the venter. This is typical of birds from western Kansas and eastern Colorado which are the palest among the Eastern Screech-Owl races (Owens, D. F., 1963, Syst. Zool. 12:8-14). Thus, on opposite sides of the hiatus, plumages characteristic of typical individuals of these two species are different, not tending to vary toward each other.

However, geographic variation across the species' ranges may complicate identification of some individuals. *O. asio* from the main body of Oklahoma can be quite similar to *O. kennicottii*. For example, a specimen of *O. asio* from Ellis County (UOMZ 14131) found dead on 25 November 1978 approaches *O. kennicottii* closely in being very gray. Also, two of the five Western Screech-Owls I examined from Oklahoma show buffy gray in the plumage. Differences in the crossbarring on the breast and belly feathers are given as characters of some potential in differentiating these two species (Marshall, *loc. cit.*; Roberson, D., 1983, Birding 15:118-119); yet, the crossbarring on 15 of the 54 gray phase Eastern Screech-Owls in the Oklahoma collection resembles that of Westerns closely. Two of the five Western Screech-Owls examined are indistinguishable from Easterns, based on these characters alone. The Oklahoma specimens of *O. kennicottii* differ from the Eastern Screech-Owls in the Oklahoma series most consistently in the pale gray speckling on the crown and posterior forehead; these small spots are much buffier in all the *O. asio* examined. This, however, is a minor character that may not be consistent across the species' ranges. Thus, the identification of many individuals, based upon plumage alone, may be tenuous without comparing them directly with a series of specimens.

L. F. Vancamp and C. J. Henny (1975, N. Amer. Fauna 71:1-65) evaluated dispersal of Eastern Screech-Owls banded as nestlings in northern Ohio; most

dispersed less than 20 miles, but about 6% dispersed farther than predicted by a Poisson distribution model — up to 185 miles. Considering the short distance separating the two species in the Oklahoma panhandle, it is possible that some individuals immigrate to opposite sides of this hiatus. Thus, range may not be the ultimate determinant of species identification in this group.

1701 LENOX, NORMAN, OKLAHOMA 73069, 5 JULY 1983.

### GENERAL NOTES

**Ruddy Shelduck collected in McClain County, Oklahoma.** — I often hunt ducks from my blind built next to a beaver (*Castor canadensis*) lodge on the shore of a farm pond 8 miles south of Washington, McClain County, central Oklahoma. My decoys are usually set amid dense tangles of Eurasian milfoil (*Myriophyllum* sp.) in shallow water fronting the blind. At 1000 on 30 October 1982 (sky clear, winds calm), a lone waterfowl approached my decoys low from the north. Because of its large size, dark body, and whitish head and wings, I at first took the bird to be a goose of some kind — possibly a hybrid or an immature Snow or Blue Goose (*Chen caerulescens*). Equipped only with a duck call, I began to make vigorous feeding chatters and "hail" calls. The strange bird set its wings and sailed straight toward me, but did not afford a view of its profile. Three times I shot at it, hitting it at least twice. It flew out and circled back. Then I realized that I had never before seen a duck or goose remotely resembling this one, even though I am an experienced hunter. When it passed near my blind again, I shot the bird and my dog retrieved it. I still had no idea as to its identity.

When I returned home, I checked my references and soon found a picture that closely matched the strange bird in *The waterfowl of the world* (Delacour, J., 1954-1964, 4 vols., Country Life, London). It was a Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*), an Old World species that breeds across the south of Eurasia from southern Spain to southwestern China and winters in the south part of this range to the Nile Valley, India, and southern China; it is "occasional" in Britain (Scott, P., 1957, A coloured key to the wildfowl of the world, The Wildfowl Trust, Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, England, p. 44; photo, p. 45).

The specimen, a male in slightly worn plumage, was prepared by C. S. Wood and deposited in the University of Oklahoma Museum of Zoology (UOMZ 17796). It weighed 1140 grams and was slightly fat. The plumage of neck, breast and sides was in heavy molt, but the rectrices and remiges were hardly worn. None of the several waterfowl breeders contacted in central Oklahoma nor the Oklahoma City Zoo was aware of an escape, but neither this fact nor the bird's apparent wild state precluded that possibility. Two other species of Eurasian waterfowl have been seen in Oklahoma recently: the Baikal Teal (*Anas formosa*) on 12 March 1981 in Major County (Scheider, F. G., 1982, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 15:29-30), and the Garganey (*Anas querquedula*) in Custer County 15-18 May 1981 (Klett, E. V., 1982, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 15:9-10), and possibly in Roger Mills County on 2 May 1979 (Ross, R., 1982, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 15:7-8). — James B. Mense, 1033 Mobile Circle, Norman, Oklahoma 73071, 25 February, 1983.

**Black-shouldered Kite in Tillman County, Oklahoma** — At about 1100 on 21 November 1982 (incorrectly reported as 21 October in *Am. Birds* 37:197, 1983), as I was watching birds along a gravelled road a few miles southwest of Tipton, Tillman County, southwestern Oklahoma, and less than a mile east of the North Fork of the Red River, I saw a Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) in adult plumage perched atop a power pole about 75 yards ahead of my car. I recognized it immediately by its medium-sized falcon-shaped body, white head and ventral coloration, gray back, and black shoulders. I stopped the car and watched the bird face-on for approximately 15 seconds before it flew off, at which time I noticed its all white tail. I am familiar with both this species (from field observations in Texas, California, and Florida) and others with which it might be confused, e.g., male Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), other kites, and falcons.

W. A. Carter and C. L. Fowler (1983, *Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc.* 16:9-11) reported nesting of this species in Latimer County, southeastern Oklahoma, in July 1982: the first record for the state since 1860 (Nice, M. M., 1931, *The birds of Oklahoma*, Rev. ed., Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv. 3(1):70). — Robin M. Carter, 8927 Liptonshire Drive, Dallas, Texas 75238, 11 August, 1983.

**Red Phalarope in Rogers County, Oklahoma.** — On 5 October 1982, during a field trip to the Oologah Reservoir mudflats near Winganon, 8 miles west of Chelsea, Rogers County, northeastern Oklahoma, Dotty Goard, Rex Hunter, Phyllis Chapman and I noticed a phalarope in gray winter plumage wading in shallow water about 100 feet ahead of us. We thought at first that it was probably a Northern Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) because that species had been seen there a month earlier. As we moved nearer, however, the thickness of the bird's bill became apparent. We knew that among the three species of phalaropes, only the Red (*Phalaropus fulicaria*) has a stout, short bill when compared to the lengthier, more "needle-like" bills of the other two. This bird's folded wings seemed darker than its light gray back, and on them we could make out a few light spots. The dark "phalarope patch" through its eye was noticeable and the top of its head somewhat dusky. When we had crept to within 50 feet, it flew out over the water, revealing a white line traversing the length of each wing. We also noted its gray, non-marked back and lack of a conspicuous, all white tail (as in Wilson's Phalarope, *Phalaropus tricolor*). We decided that the moot bird was a Red Phalarope.

About an hour later and a mile south of the above location, we found a second phalarope, paler than the first, and with completely white crown. It, too, had a dark, stout bill. It was feeding on a mud bar with several "peeps" (*Calidris* spp.) and a few Killdeers (*Charadrius vociferus*), but flushed when they did, not allowing us much time to study it. Five days later (10 October), Howard and Dotty Goard, Melinda Droege, Bonnie Gall and Randy Porter saw two Red Phalaropes in the area of our initial sighting. These two remained together, "whirling" in characteristic phalarope style just offshore. On 12 October only one bird could be found there by Dotty Goard and Phyllis Chapman; Dotty took several recognizable photographs that are on file in the Cameron

University Museum of Zoology (CUMZ 895) in Lawton, Oklahoma. She and her husband Howard located possibly this same individual again on 16 October, this time in company of six Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*).

There are only nine other records for *Phalaropus fulicaria* in Oklahoma: five sightings and a specimen in Oklahoma County, one sighting in Canadian County, a specimen from Cimarron County (Sutton, G. M., 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 17, and a specimen from Comanche County (Tyler, J. D., 1979, Birds of southwestern Oklahoma. Contrib. No. 2, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. of Oklahoma, Norman, p. 25). — Ella Delap, 409 N. Wyandotte, Dewey, Oklahoma 74029, 9 November 1982.

**Curve-billed Thrasher in Cleveland County, Oklahoma.** — In my backyard in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, at about 0800 on 1 October 1980, I heard a sharp whistled note that I thought to be an unfamiliar call of the Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*). About 15 minutes later, I noticed a gray, mockingbird-size bird with thin, slightly decurved bill perched atop a neighbor's dog-pen. As this bird turned its head in the bright sunlight, its iris shone a pale yellow-orange. I rushed for my binocular. When I returned, the bird was nowhere to be seen, but presently it flew from behind a fence to the roof of the dog-pen, where I identified it as a Curve-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma curvirostre*). At about 0930 I netted, banded, and photographed the bird: its skull was unpneumatized; its wing, tail, and culmen measurements were, respectively, 103, 113, and 29 millimeters.

This represents the first record of *Toxostoma curvirostre* for Cleveland County and the second for central Oklahoma: a single bird was seen repeatedly in Oklahoma County from 31 May to 30 August 1970 (Sutton, G. M., 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 31). The species is resident in the Black Mesa country of northwestern Cimarron County and it has been seen repeatedly in southwestern Oklahoma since 1972 (Tyler, J. D., 1979, Birds of southwestern Oklahoma, Contrib. No. 2, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 38). — Joseph A. Grzybowski, 1701 Lenox, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 29 July 1981.

**Nashville Warbler banded in Oklahoma recovered in Nayarit, Mexico.** — On 26 September 1980, N. Carolyn Gritzmaker, Wesley S. Isaacs and I spent several hours mist-netting and banding small birds at Lake Overholser in Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma. Altogether we banded 13 species of birds (one to six of each). One that I banded was a Nashville Warbler (*Vermivora ruficapilla*, No. 1470-99829) of unknown age and sex. In September 1981, Warren D. Harden, under whom I have a banding subpermit, was notified by the U. S. Department of the Interior Bird Banding Laboratory that this bird had been recovered during March, 1981 (exact date not given) at the village of San Pedro de Honor, Mexico, which is located near Acajoneta, about 60 miles northwest of Tepic, the capital city of the state of Nayarit, and approximately 1050 miles south-southwest of Oklahoma City.

Curious about the circumstances involved in this band return, I wrote to the Banding Laboratory requesting additional information. The reply included a letter in Spanish, together with translation, which read: "At San Pedro de Honor, Nayarit, a 9 year old child was walking under the trees with a sling shot and little birds were on the trees. The child killed one of them and it had a band on its leg bearing an address, and due to the fact that it requires notification, we are informing you." It was signed by Verrancia Navegas Orasco, probably the child's mother. The Nashville Warbler is widespread in winter and during migration in Mexico (Peterson, R. T., and E. L. Chalif, 1973, A field guide to Mexican birds, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, p. 203). — John S. Shackford, *Route 1, Box 125, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73111, 10 July 1983.*

**Western Tanager in Comanche County, Oklahoma.** — About mid-morning on 6 May 1979, a clear, almost calm day with temperature near 70°F, Hannah Bass, Mary Korthase and I happened upon an adult male Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*) at Camp Doris in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. The bird was in full breeding color and I immediately recognized it, having made the species' acquaintance years earlier in Colorado. Its robin-like song first alerted us to its presence. Through our binoculars, we all noticed its bright yellow body plumage, the redness of its head, and the black wings and tail. Upon closer inspection, we also discerned the bird's light wing bars and its heavy, ivory-colored, tanager bill. Perched about 20 feet up in an oak when first seen, the tanager soon flew across the road to another oak, where we found it again. Two of us tried in vain to obtain a photograph.

To date, *Piranga ludoviciana* has been recorded primarily from Cimarron and Texas counties in far western Oklahoma, in fall from 20 August to 1 October, and from 10 May to 3 June in spring; several eastward sightings are "open to question since Summer Tanagers are often particolored in such a way as to look like Western Tanagers" (Sutton, G. M., 1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 41). The species is not listed for southwestern Oklahoma by J. D. Tyler (1979, Birds of southwestern Oklahoma, Contrib. No. 2, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman). — Alice Hensy, 1527 S. St. Louis, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74120, 15 May 1979.

**Late nesting of Grasshopper Sparrow in Texas County, Oklahoma.** — On 16 August 1981, in open grassland about 7 miles west of Hooker, Texas County, in the Oklahoma panhandle, I happened to see a Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) carrying an insect in its bill. Guessing that the bird must be feeding young, I watched it carefully for some time. Eventually it flew to a spot about 35 yards from the road and disappeared in the grass. I went to this spot, but was unable to flush the parent bird; I did, however, find the nest. It contained three small chicks — none a Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) — whose major wing quills were visible though short. R. L. Smith (1968, *In Bent, A. C., et al., Bull. U. S. Natl. Mus. 237, Pt. 2, p. 732*)

reported that at "four days, wing feathers break through the sheath" in Grasshopper Sparrow nestlings. Thus, these chicks were less than four days old. *Ammodramus savannarum* is known to be two-brooded (Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 730). It is rarely parasitized by cowbirds (Friedmann, H., 1938, *Auk* 55:41-50), probably because it nests in dense grass, usually well away from the woodland edge, and adults are very secretive when approaching or leaving the nest.

This nest is apparently the first to have been recorded in Texas County, and 16 August the latest date of record on which a nest containing young has been found in Oklahoma. Chicks "barely out of the nest" were observed in Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, on 18 August 1959 (Sutton, G. M., 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 606). A bird in juvenal feather (male, UOMZ 3962) was collected near Goodwell, Texas County, on 2 August 1960. Another young bird was collected on 28 September 1975 in Norman, Cleveland County (UOMZ 10806); the two innermost primaries (one and two) of each wing were absent, indicating an approximate hatch date of 20 August (see Sutton, G. M., 1936, *Occas. Pap. Mus. Zool., Univ. Michigan* 336:1-7). Even though R. R. Graber (1955, Ph.D. Diss., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 84) indicated that young Grasshopper Sparrows complete post-juvenal molt before migration, the Cleveland County bird collected in September may have been a migrant that hatched outside Oklahoma. — Wayne Easley, *Route 2, Box 181J, Gentry, Arkansas 72734, 14 December 1981*.

FROM THE EDITOR: The Whooping Crane has long stood as the American archetype of endangered species. From a low of 21 birds in 1941, the population had grown to 119 by 1980. Of these, there were 28 birds in three captive flocks in Maryland, Wisconsin, and Texas in 1980 and 91 in two wild flocks. Fifteen of these had Sandhill Crane foster-parents; these migrate between Grays Lake, Idaho, and the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico. The others constitute the famous flock that winters on the Texas coast. The Canadian and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services implemented a long-range comprehensive recovery plan for the Whooping Crane in 1980. Basically, it entails 1) renewed efforts toward managing and enlarging habitat, 2) improved law-enforcement, 3) expanded endeavors toward captive propagation, 4) continuation of the successful Sandhill Crane foster-parent program, 5) reducing mortality, 6) determining desired distribution, and 7) improving public information (from *Endangered Species Technical Bulletin*, 1980, 5(2):1 & 4).

Special appreciation is due Lawrence Curtis, Director of the Oklahoma City Zoo, for checking with central Oklahoma bird breeders concerning the possible escape of a Ruddy Shelduck. — Jack D. Tyler.