

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.

Black-crested Titmouse in Comanche County, Oklahoma. — At 1500 on 17 April 1985, Jay Banta and I saw a Black-crested Titmouse (*Parus bicolor atricapillus*) in a post oak tree (*Quercus stellata*) growing near a small stream on the East Range of the Fort Sill Military Reservation in Comanche County, Oklahoma. I could clearly see the black wash on its crown and crest through my nine-power binocular as well as its grayish color and small size. This spot is a mile south of the Elmer Thomas Lake dam at the east end of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. The terrain here is typical of other intermontane parts of the Wichitas: open oak woodlands above rough, grass-covered granite ridges that separate numerous intervening draws and stream-courses.

Sutton (1979, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. and Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 29) mentioned records of this southwestern race of the Tufted Titmouse from Harmon, Greer, Jackson, Tillman, Kiowa and Cotton counties of southwest Oklahoma. The records closest to the Comanche County sighting are from near Taylor in southeastern Cotton County and from Otter Creek, just west of Snyder in Kiowa County. The former location is about 40 miles to the SSE, the latter, 30 miles to the WSW. — Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biological Sciences, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 26 October 1989.*

A Curve-billed Thrasher nest in Texas County, Oklahoma. — On 23 June 1985, while doing field work associated with the compilation of a check-list of the birds of the Oklahoma Panhandle (1986, Birds of the Oklahoma Panhandle, Oklahoma Dept. Wildl. Conserv., Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), I saw a Curve-billed Thrasher (*Taxostoma curvirostre*) in Guymon, Texas County. As I drove through a residential part of west Guymon that day, I heard a "thrasher-type" song that confused me. After some effort to attract the singer by "squeaking" I finally saw the bird well. It was a Curve-billed Thrasher, presumably an adult male. Nowhere did I see either cholla cactus (*Opuntia imbricata*) or mesquite trees (*Prosopis juliflora*), thorny plants selected almost invariably for nest placement where the thrasher has been known to breed in Oklahoma: the Black Mesa area at the west end of the Panhandle (where it selects cholla) and the extreme southwestern corner of the state (where mesquite is chosen).

On 22 June 1988, I was again driving through Guymon, about ½ mile north of the above location, when I noticed a cactus garden on the southeast corner of the intersection of NW 13th and Sunset Lane. It was on a vacant city lot about 50 x 120 ft. in size. Many prickly-pear cacti (*Opuntia* sp.) were present, but most prominent were about 40 large clumps of cholla cactus. Remembering the Curve-bill I saw near here in 1985, I carefully checked each cholla for nests. I found two suspect old ones, then discovered an adult Curve-bill on a fresh nest. After being photographed, the adult left the nest, allowing me to see therein one chick, several days old. The day was very hot (high of 102° F); I departed soon thereafter so the adult could return to shade its young. I wondered whether or not additional chicks might have succumbed in recent days to the hot weather. The high temperature in Guymon had been at least 100° F each day from 19 to 22 June.

The closest area to Guymon where Curve-bills are known to nest is in the Black Mesa region of Cimarron County, about 75 miles to the northwest. Apparently, these are the first Curve-billed Thrasher records of any sort for Texas County, Oklahoma. — John S. Shackford, 6008-A N.W. Expressway, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73132, 12 November 1989.

Common Bushtit in Greer County, Oklahoma. — While studying birds at Quartz Mountain State Park in Greer County, southwestern Oklahoma, on the morning of 25 March 1989, I encountered an unusual bird among a small flock of Carolina Chickadees (*Parus carolinensis*). The flock of about a half dozen birds was flitting about in a large American elm (*Ulmus americanus*) when I noticed in their number a smaller, “chunkier” bird. About the size of a kinglet, the little bird had a longish tail that had initially caught my eye. It was a nondescript little thing, a bit lighter gray below than above, and its head was slightly darker. Because the elm had yet to leaf out, I got excellent looks through my binocular and soon decided that it was a Common Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*). For several moments, the loose-knit flock remained in sight before disappearing into a post oak (*Quercus stellata*) nearby.

Approximately a half hour later, Brad Carlton and several other members of the Oklahoma City Audubon Society saw the bushtit again in about the same spot. All agreed with my identification.

The upland oak-elm forest in the park fringes the lower reaches of numerous granite ridges. The strip of trees where the bushtit was observed lay between a macadam road and the shore of Altus-Lugert Reservoir.

There are only three published records of this species for southwest Oklahoma, all for the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Comanche County. The dates of sighting were 20 December (incorrectly reported as 30 December) 1960, at which time four bushtits were observed; 24 February 1974 (one bird); and 15 July 1963 when at least two were discovered (Tyler, J.D., 1979, *Birds of southwestern Oklahoma*, Contrib. Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist. No. 2, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 36). The above sighting, therefore, is the first known for Greer County. — Victoria Mason, *Naturalist, Quartz Mountain State Park, Route 1, Box 40, Lone Wolf, Oklahoma 73655, 10 April 1989.*

Common Grackle consumes American Goldfinch. — During the mid-afternoon of 5 March 1989, we watched a male Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) repeatedly tear shreds of flesh from a dead American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*) in our yard in Wichita Falls, northcentral Texas. Seven or eight inches of snow covered the ground, and continued to fall during the afternoon. Temperatures were in the middle 20s (°F), but a stiff north wind drove the chill factor downward below 0°F, creating deep drifts and near-blizzard conditions.

All that remained of the smaller bird were skin and bones, so we assumed that the grackle had consumed the rest; whether or not it killed the goldfinch is conjectural. Food was plentiful in our feeders, therefore we doubt that the grackle was driven by excessive hunger. It is possible that the Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) that infrequently visits our yard might have killed the little

finch. Recently, we had observed it clutching a junco (*Junco hyemalis*) as it perched in a tree, and another time saw it on the ground with a sparrow of some kind. Too, there were feathers of a Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) spread about our yard one day.

The yard is well shaded and protected from wind by numerous trees, ornamental shrubs and vines. Most of these provide some food and cover for birds, and the feeders supplement these natural foods. Particularly in winter, the feeders attract great numbers of a variety of species.

Several members of the subfamily Icterinae in the family Emberezidae (blackbirds, meadowlarks, grackles, etc.) have been observed to prey on other birds. For example, Common Snipes (*Capella gallinago*) and American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) have been victims of Common Grackles in southeastern Texas while snow covered the ground (Bent, A.C., 1958, Life histories of North American birds, U.S. Natl. Mus Bull. No. 211:291). The Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*) is also known to prey on American Goldfinches: on 13 January 1979, Emma H. Messerly watched one of these blackbirds feed on a goldfinch carcass in her backyard in Bartlesville, northeastern Oklahoma, after snow had been on the ground for about 10 days (Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 12:6-7, 1979). — Bud and Mary Cummings, 2412 Inglewood St., Wichita Falls, Texas 76301, 13 April 1989.

New House Finch records for western Oklahoma. — At approximately 1930 on 11 July 1978, a group of House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) were excitedly chattering and flitting around a strange bird in our backyard in Lawton, Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. The newcomer was a slender, brown finch about the size of one of the House Sparrows, but its head and chest were bright reddish-pink. Eleven days later (22 July), we got close looks at probably this same bird feeding on the smaller seeds in our window feeder. It was a male House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*). We did not see it again that summer. These sightings were reported in American Birds (1978, 32:1182).

On 11 April 1979, at 1315, a male House Finch appeared in an evergreen tree in our heavily-ornamented backyard. Presently, it came to our feeder, ate of the small seeds, then departed after about five minutes. It returned briefly to eat at 1500, at which time both Janet M. McGee and I saw it well. The next day it returned at 1730 and on the 14th at both 1100 and 1500. Each time, it chased the House Sparrows away from the feeder. On the morning of the 14th, the House Finch fed on the ground for a few moments with a Brown Thrasher (*Taxostoma rufum*) before flying up to the feeder. The 17th was a day of light rain and mist and the bird did not show up, but at 0800 the next day, it chased a Harris' Sparrow (*Zonotrichia querula*) from the feeder. Not once did it visit the nearby bird bath. On the morning of the 20th we saw it, and finally on the 22nd it fed until 1830, alternately flying to the ground for scattered seeds, then back up to the feeder.

Not until 9 September did a House Finch visit the feeder again. This time a male drank water at 1000, then departed. At 1230 on 3 October, Janet M.

McGee, who lives about a half mile west of our residence, watched a female House Finch eat crabgrass seeds on the ground in her backyard.

During the winters of 1980–82 we also saw House Finches in our yard, but failed to record the dates. In 1983, a small flock composed of a male and three females visited the feeder on 3 January. One or more of them returned on the 8th, 12th (three birds) and 14th. For about three weeks they were absent, but reappeared on 9 and 16 February and in March on the 12th (male and female), 16th, 18th, 20th, 22nd (two females) and 28th (pair). The pair again showed up on 1 and 2 April 1983. On 7 April a male sang in our yard for 15 minutes. We saw on the 9th three females and perhaps the same male. A male again sang in our yard on 19 and 20 April, but the species was neither seen nor heard after that in 1983.

On 20 July 1985, Edith Bishop saw several young House Finches at her backyard feeder in Altus, Jackson County, accompanied by a pair of adults. A bit earlier, she had seen two males simultaneously (*pers. comm.*, J.D. Tyler).

Louis E. McGee mist-netted a female in his yard in Lawton on 12 January 1986. It was banded (No. 970-39008) and then released. On 27 December 1986, two birds were seen by B. Freeman and V. Huckaby 8 miles northeast of Duncan, Stephens County (*Scissortail* 37(2):23, 1987).

On 16 May 1987, John Ridge, Barry Bryant and John Taylor identified four House Finches (at least one singing male) in the northern section of Woodward in Woodward County, northwestern Oklahoma. Next day, David O. Dillon, Jack D. Tyler, James Norman, John S. Tomer and several other members of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society found two singing males and one female at a backyard in the same vicinity. That same day (17 May), Dillon and Tyler heard at least two males singing from large cottonwood trees (*Populus deltoides*) in Clinton, Custer County.

In Lawton, the McGees saw House Finches in their yard on 9 and 10 January 1988. It snowed both of these days. One female visited their feeder on the 9th, two on the 10th. They recorded the species again on 10 May 1989 when a female was observed there.

Helen Priddy, a student at Cameron University, saw an adult male in east Lawton on 24 June 1989. Though she listened intently, she failed to hear it sing.

Several other records exist for western Oklahoma counties including Harmon, Jackson, Beckham (Tyler, J.D., 1979, *Birds of southwestern Oklahoma*, Contrib. Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist. No. 2, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 50; Oliphant and Brown, 1984, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 17:9–12) and Grant counties (Byfield, 1979, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 12:34–35). In Beckham County, the House Finch nested in 1982 and 1983 (Oliphant and Brown, 1984, *loc. cit.*) — Leonard and Esther Beavers, 2413 NW Cheyenne Avenue, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 18 July 1989.

INDEX OF BIRD NAMES

BY JACK D. TYLER

- Accipiter cooperii*: 13,29
Agelaius phoeniceus: 30
 American Avocet: 12,13
 American Goldfinch: 8,29,30
 American Robin: 30
 American Tree Sparrow: 1
 American Wigeon: 24
Amphispiza belli: 1-2
Amphispiza bilineata: 1
Archilochus colubris: 3-5
 Ash-throated Flycatcher: 22-23
Asio flammeus: 7
 Avocet, American: 12,13
 Blackbird: 30
 Red-winged: 30
 Rusty: 30
 Black-crested Titmouse: 28
 Black-necked Stilt: 10-13
 Black-shouldered Kite: 5-6
 Black-throated Sparrow: 1
 Bluebird, Eastern: 23
 Brown Thrasher: 30
Bubo virginianus: 18
 Bunting, Painted: 8
 Bushtit, Common: 29
Buteo jamaicensis: 7
Buteo lineatus: 17-21
 Canvasback: 24
Capella gallinago: 30
Carduelis pinus: 1
Carduelis tristis: 8,29,30
 Carolina Chickadee: 15,29
Carpodacus mexicanus: 30-31
 Catbird, Gray: 15-16
 Chickadee, Carolina: 15,29
 Chimney Swift: 6
Circus cyaneus: 6
 Cliff Swallow: 15
 Common Bushtit: 29
 Common Grackle: 29-30
 Common Loon: 9-10
 Common Moorhen: 23-24
 Common Snipe: 30
 Cooper's Hawk: 13,29
 Curve-billed Thrasher: 28-29
 Dark-eyed Junco: 1,30
 Dickcissel: 16
 Diver, White-billed: 10
 Duck, Canvasback: 24
 Gadwall: 24
 Mallard: 24
 Redhead: 24
Dumetella carolinensis: 15-16
 Eastern Bluebird: 23
 Eastern Screech-Owl: 7-8,14-15
Elanus caeruleus: 5-6
Euphagus carolinus: 30
 European Starling: 30
Falco mexicanus: 6-7
 Falcon, Prairie: 6-7
 Finch, House: 30-31
 Flycatcher, Ash-throated: 22-23
 Great-crested: 22
 Gadwall: 24
 Gallinula chloropus: 23-24
 Gavia adamsii: 9-10
 Gavia immer: 9-10
 Golden-crowned Kinglet: 16
 Goldfinch, American: 8,29,30
 Grackle: 30
 Common: 29-30
 Gray Catbird: 15-16
 Great-crested Flycatcher: 22
 Great Horned Owl: 18
 Great Northern Loon: 10
 Green-winged Teal: 24
 Gull, Herring: 26
 Lesser Black-backed: 26
 Ring-billed: 25-26
 Harrier, Northern: 6
 Harris' Sparrow: 30
 Hawk, Cooper's: 13,29
 Red-shouldered: 17-21
 Red-tailed: 7
 Herring Gull: 26
Himantopus mexicanus: 10-13
Hirundo pyrrhonota: 15
 House Finch: 30-31
 House Sparrow: 30
 Hummingbird, Ruby-throated: 3-5
 Ibis, White-faced: 27
Ictinia mississippiensis: 5,6
 Junco, Dark-eyed: 1,30
Junco hyemalis: 1,30
 Kinglet, Golden-crowned: 16
 Kite, Black-shouldered: 5-6
 Mississippi: 5,6
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker: 22
Larus argentatus: 26
Larus delawarensis: 25,26
Larus fuscus: 26
 Lesser Black-backed Gull: 26
 Loon, Common: 9-10
 Great Northern: 10
 Yellow-billed: 9-10
 Mallard: 24
 Martin, Purple: 6
 Meadowlark: 6,30
 Mississippi Kite: 5,6
 Moorhen, Common: 23-24
Myiarchus cinerascens: 22-23
Myiarchus crinitus: 22
 Northern Harrier: 6
 Northern Pintail: 24
 Northern Shoveler: 24
 Osprey: 13-14
Otus asio: 7-8,14-15
 Owl, Eastern Screech: 7-8, 14-15
 Great Horned: 18
 Short-eared: 7
 Painted Bunting: 8
Pandion haliaetus: 13-14
Parus bicolor atricapillus: 28
Parus carolinensis: 15,29
Passer domesticus: 30
Passerina ciris: 8
Picoides scalaris: 22
 Pine Siskin: 1
 Pintail, Northern: 24
Plegadis chihi: 27
 Prairie Falcon: 6-7
Progne subis: 6
Psaltriparus minimus: 29
 Purple Martin: 6
Quiscalus quiscula: 29-30
Recurvirostra americana: 12-13
 Redhead: 24
 Red-shouldered Hawk: 17-21
 Red-tailed Hawk: 7
 Red-winged Blackbird: 30
Regulus satrapa: 16
 Ring-billed Gull: 25,26
 Robin, American: 30
 Royal Tern: 25-27
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird: 3-5
 Rusty Blackbird: 30
 Sage Sparrow: 1-2
 Screech-Owl, Eastern: 7-8,14-15
 Short-eared Owl: 7
 Shoveler, Northern: 24
Sialia sialis: 23
 Siskin, Pine: 1
 Snipe, Common: 30
 Sparrow, American Tree: 1
 Black-throated: 1
 Harris': 30
 House: 30
 Sage: 1-2
 White-crowned: 1
Spiza americana: 16
Spizella arborea: 1
 Starling, European: 30
Sterna maxima: 25-27
 Stilt, Black-necked: 10-13
Sturnella sp.: 6
Sturnus vulgaris: 30
 Swallow, Cliff: 15
 Swift, Chimney: 6
 Teal, Green-winged: 24
 Tern, Royal: 25-27
 Thrasher, Brown: 30
 Curve-billed: 28-29
 Titmouse, Black-crested: 28
Taxostoma curvirostre: 28-29
Taxostoma rufum: 30
Turdus migratorius: 30
 White-billed Diver: 10
 White-crowned Sparrow: 1
 White-faced Ibis: 27
 Wigeon, American: 24
 Woodpecker, Ladder-backed: 22
 Yellow-billed Loon: 9-10
Zonotrichia albicollis: 1
 (should be *Zonotrichia leucophrys*)
Zonotrichia leucophrys: 1
 (error: see *Zonotrichia albicollis*)
Zonotrichia querula: 30

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