

A BIG OWL WATCHES THE HAND THAT PORTRAYS HER

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

While a “grad” and faculty member at Cornell 50 years ago I heard many versions of a charming story about the great bird artist, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and a farmer who was in “downtown Ithaca” for the day and a Great Horned Owl, *Bubo virginianus*, that had been caught red-handed in a henhouse. The owl, very much alive, was on display in Ithaca’s leading hardware store and word had gone round that it was the biggest owl anyone had ever seen in that part of the world.



GREAT HORNED OWL

Painting by Debra K. Sharits of Duncan, Oklahoma.

Fuertes, hearing report after report of the monster owl, began to wonder what species it was, so he went to the hardware store for a look. While he was watching the captive through the plate glass a man who was obviously from the country joined him, starting a conversation with "It is a big one, ain't it?" To which Fuertes replied, "Yes, it's big, but not as big as I had expected it to be." The farmer, noting the deprecatory tone of the statement, blurted out: "Well, now, that famous professor at the university — Looie Fewerts is his name, you know who I mean — says it's bigger than any owl he ever seen, and he ought to know." Fuertes, smiling inwardly at hearing himself called famous, and wanting to avoid embarrassing anyone, wound the confrontation up with something like this: "It's a big one, all right, really big."

It's an interesting fact that as a boy in Nebraska, Minnesota, and Oregon I never saw a living great horn in the wilds. In Albert Lano's fine collection of birdskins in Aitkin, Minnesota there were several specimens of the handsome bird, and these I handled with a feeling close to awe. Those curved, steel-hard, needle-sharp claws! My copy of Frank Chapman's "Bird-Life" told me that the great horn lived "only in the wilder, more heavily wooded parts of the country," a statement that didn't help much. Indeed what I knew about great horns could be summed up tersely: they were killers. In Ernest Thompson Seton's "Wild Animals I Have Known," it was a great horn that ended the life of poor Redruff, the "partridge" of the Don Valley. In those days I didn't know that the ruffed grouse, *Bonasa umbellus*, was known as the partridge in some parts of its wide range.

It was in West Virginia, very early one spring, that I came face to face at last with a wild great horn. An inch of snow covered the ground. Near the mouth of Jordan Run, a tributary to Buffalo Creek, I happened upon a ragged old nest — probably a squirrel's — over the edge of which peered down a creature that looked like a cat. I knew at once that it was a great horn. When I started to climb the tree the owl flew off, scattering in all directions the snow that had gathered on its back. There were two eggs, white, almost spherical, incredibly beautiful. What a day to remember! The eggs hatched. The chicks grew larger daily. In due season they fledged, faced with the problem of catching rats, cottontails, and squirrels *on their own*.

In West Virginia someone gave me a young great horn that I raised as a "pet." It was never very tame, but it swallowed great numbers of rats and mice that kids of the neighborhood brought it. I was glad when it became old enough to obtain its own food. I liberated it a long way from town, hoping that I'd never see it again.

As State Ornithologist of Pennsylvania (1924–1929) I saw little of the great horn in the wilds but was deeply interested in examining the stomachs of the scores of owls that were sent to the Game Commission's office for bounty payment. What my assistant, Leo Luttringer, and I found was about what we expected, namely, proof that there was some justification for the great horn's unpopularity. It was, indeed, a destroyer of game and poultry. One owl that I was told about was so persistent in stealing chickens that it was caught twice in steel traps set on fenceposts. Caught the first time, it pulled itself free, trap and all. The following night it was caught again — with a trap on each foot.

Through year after year of dealing with the great horn I never felt the urge to draw one from life. I have often wondered why. Then, at the University of Michigan one day, someone brought in a great horn that had appeal. It was big, beautifully feathered, and docile. After being talked to a bit it submitted to having its feathered toes stroked. It gave up popping its bill unless startled by the slamming of a door. I settled down with pencil, eraser, brushes, and the old Fuertes paintbox, and did a portrait of the owl's head. While I worked my model never looked at my face. What it watched was my right hand. That hand seemed to fascinate it. Its facial expression was at times a bit frightening. What, I thought, if that owl should decide to pounce on one of those fingers? For all I knew they might look like weasels to the owl!

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THE BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE IN OKLAHOMA

BY MITCHELL OLIPHANT

The Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) is almost circumpolar in distribution, breeding in the Arctic Ocean and the higher latitudes of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans (Harrison, P., 1983, *Seabirds, an identification guide*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, p. 359). Its winter range extends southward in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans to approximately the Tropic of Cancer (*op. cit.*, p. 435). The species is essentially pelagic, and, outside its breeding grounds, is not often recorded over land even in coastal areas, although it "Occurs occasionally in many inland localities, including Great Lakes" (Farrand, J., Jr., 1983, *The Audubon master guide to birding*, Vol. 2, p. 78, Alfred A. Knopf, New York). Thus it is surprising that this ocean-loving gull should show up in Oklahoma, a state lying hundreds of miles from any ocean. Nevertheless, kittiwakes have visited the state 13 times during the last 30 years.

The first sighting in Oklahoma seems to have occurred in Tulsa in 1959. This kittiwake, in first winter feather, was seen by numerous observers, including Anne B. Reynolds, L. Bruce Reynolds and John S. Tomer from 8 to 29 March 1959 at or near Lake Yahola in Mohawk Park (1959, *Aud. Field Notes*, 13:305). It was photographed on 15 March by Jerry Neil and on 18 March by Jack P. Barrett. Five of these photos are on file at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range (Sutton, G. M., [1982], *Species summaries of Oklahoma birds*, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman). Only six months later, another immature Black-legged Kittiwake appeared at Lake Yahola. From 12 October to 7 November 1959, Anne Reynolds, her husband Bruce and possibly others, studied this bird (1960, *Aud. Field Notes*, 14:51). The possibility that this kittiwake was the same bird as was seen the previous spring was rejected by Sutton, who wrote: "had it been the same bird someone surely would have noted it during the summer, for bird students at Tulsa have long been perceptive and active" (Sutton [1982] *op. cit.*). This remarkable year for Black-legged Kittiwake sightings in Oklahoma was capped when J. David Ligon and W. Marvin Davis collected a bird in its first winter plumage on 19 November 1959 below the Lake Overholser dam in Oklahoma City (1960, *Aud. Field Notes*, 14:51).

There were no further reports in Oklahoma until 30 December 1967. On that date, John G. Newell, while helping to conduct the Oklahoma City Audubon Christmas Bird Count, sighted another first winter bird, again near the dam at Lake Overholser (1968, Aud. Field Notes, 22:452, 548). It remained in the vicinity until 5 April 1968. Newell wrote: "Although it associated with Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*), it frequently fed or rested alone in the vicinity of the dam — the nearest thing it could find to a steep-sided sea-cliff" (Sutton [1982], *op. cit.*).

On 24 November 1968, another Black-legged Kittiwake was found in the Tulsa area. On that date, G. C. and Ethel Getgood discovered one along the Arkansas River below the Keystone Reservoir dam (1969, Aud. Field Notes, 23:76). On 16 and 17 December 1968, Anne and Bruce Reynolds observed probably the same bird there and it was in first winter feather (Sutton [1982], *op. cit.*). This bird apparently lingered well into 1969, having been last recorded on 10 March of that year. Observers during this period included the Reynoldses and John S. Tomer (Tomer, 1970, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc., 3:30; Sutton [1982], *op. cit.*).

During the decade of the 1970s there were three kittiwake sightings in Oklahoma. From 5–7 November 1972 a singleton appeared at Tulsa, chiefly at impoundments in Mohawk Park, as reported by Anne and Bruce Reynolds *et al.* (1973, Amer. Birds, 27:80). A bird in first winter feather was noted by several persons below Hulah Reservoir dam in Osage County between 16 and 19 February 1974. Observers included Elizabeth Hicks on 16 February and Dotty M. Goard and Madge Hildreth on 19 February (1974, Amer. Birds, 28:658). Again at Hulah Reservoir, on 26 December 1976, an immature bird was discovered by Howard W. and Dotty M. Goard; they noted its notched tail, black legs and bill, and the dusky area on the head, but "no black line across the back of the neck;" it was smaller than several Ring-billed Gulls nearby (Sutton [1982], *op. cit.*).

The 1980s produced four sightings of kittiwakes in Oklahoma. Below the Great Salt Plains Reservoir dam in Alfalfa County, an immature bird was observed repeatedly by J. A. Kirk *et al.* between 1 and 19 January 1981 (Sutton [1982], *op. cit.*). On 8 November 1986, I discovered an immature Black-legged Kittiwake on Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City. The black legs and bill, black spot behind the eye, black band across the back of its neck and the prominent "W" marking on the wings when the bird was in flight all led me to the conclusion that it was a first winter bird, perhaps no more than four months old. Although the bird was elusive and sometimes difficult to find, it was nevertheless seen by a number of observers over a period of approximately a month and a half. The last sighting was made by Bob Funston on 21 December 1986 during the Oklahoma City Christmas Bird Count. I photographed it on 9 November 1986. This photograph was submitted to the Bird Records Committee of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society. John S. Shackford also obtained a nice photo of the bird in flight, and this one, together with another of the bird resting on the water, was published in American Birds (1987, 41:563).

The year 1987 passed without any report of Black-legged Kittiwakes in

Oklahoma, but on 27 March 1988, M. Gustafson, J. Hoffman, *et al.* reported one at the Kaw Lake dam on the Kay-Osage County border (1988, *The Scissor-tail*, 38(3):37).

Early in 1989, there appeared what has probably become the most thoroughly documented Black-legged Kittiwake sighting ever in Oklahoma. On 18 February, John Newell spied a kittiwake that he felt was a first winter bird standing on ice near the Lake Overholser dam in Oklahoma City (pers. comm.). He informed me of it the next day, and I immediately began searching for the bird. On 24 February I finally located it, again near the dam. During the next few weeks, scarcely a day went by on which someone failed to observe the kittiwake. With a video camcorder I obtained more than an hour of footage of the bird flying about, sometimes passing by only a few feet away. Steve Metz took several excellent photographs of it in flight, one of which was published in *American Birds* (1989, 43:231).

On the morning of 19 March 1989 — the last day the bird was seen — Esther A. Key and I were watching the kittiwake from the dam as it made wide circles overhead, occasionally swooping down almost close enough to touch, when, to our astonishment, it suddenly landed on one of the dam's concrete buttresses which face downstream. Here it remained for about 15 minutes while we photographed it with both still and video cameras from as close as 20 feet. It was very tame, as if affording us one last opportunity to study this visitor from afar. Despite intensive searching during the next few days, we never found it again.

A review of the historical record of Black-legged Kittiwake sightings in Oklahoma has revealed that during the last 30 years, 13 birds have shown up in the state, an average of more than one sighting every three years. Most (if not all) of these were in their first winter feather. The dates of occurrence have ranged from 12 October to 5 April (Sutton [1982], *op. cit.*). Thus, the Black-legged Kittiwake may be described as a rare transient or winter resident in Oklahoma. It is to be looked for around any large impoundment in the state.

3116 N. VIRGINIA, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73118, 2 NOVEMBER 1989.

GENERAL NOTES

Ringed Turtle Dove in Oklahoma. — On 24 February 1989 at about 0730, I noticed a very pale dove in the branches of a large silver maple tree (*Acer saccharinum*) in our backyard in Norman, Cleveland County, Oklahoma. Upon closer examination with 8x40X binoculars, the black half-ring about the back of the neck identified the bird as a Ringed Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia risoria*). It flew off shortly thereafter. About two weeks later, on 12 March 1989, apparently the same bird again appeared in our backyard. This time, I obtained photographs of it on the ground where various songbirds had scattered sunflower seeds from our feeder. I also heard its distinctive, trilled "coo." During the next two months I saw or heard this bird six times more, the last on the morning of 14 April 1989.

D. Goodwin (1983, *Pigeons and doves of the world*, Brit. Mus., London, pp. 117–119) describes *S. risoria* as: "Domesticated. Often locally established in a

feral or semi-feral condition but such colonies seldom prosper." It is established in the United States in the Los Angeles region, west-central Florida and the Houston area (American Ornithologists' Union, 1983, Check-list of North American birds, 6th ed., Lawrence, Kansas, p. 254). There is no mention of this species by G. M. Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman) or by authors of similar texts in surrounding states except for Texas. There, W. M. Pulich (1988, The birds of north central Texas, Texas A & M Univ. Press, College Station, p. 408) says: "This popular cage bird is frequently reported around large cities, as the result of an intentional release or escape from captivity. It has not established itself in the north central Texas study area."

It is almost certain that this dove was an escapee as described by Pulich. However, this still seems to be the first recorded sighting of *S. risoria* in Oklahoma. If other Ringed Turtle Doves appear subsequently, each sighting should be thoroughly documented; the establishment of a colony in Oklahoma is not beyond possibility. — Andrew N. Feldt, 1627 Denison Drive, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 25 September 1989.

Additional summer records for the Rufous-sided Towhee in Oklahoma. — The Rufous-sided Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) is a migrant and winter resident throughout Oklahoma. In most localities this species has been reported to be an uncommon to common bird depending upon the amount of woodland border and brush, especially in riparian habitat. Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, pp. 599–602) summarized the status of this species according to evaluations given by observers throughout Oklahoma.

Evidence of the actual nesting in the state is very limited. In 1979, I reviewed early records and reported two recent nestings in Delaware County, northeastern Oklahoma. One of these was in 1977 and the other in 1978 (Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 12:9–11).

During July and early August 1985, I found a male and female towhee together regularly in a new area on the Little Lewis Whirlwind Nature Sanctuary, several km from the nesting sites described in 1979. The sanctuary is located about 4.5 miles south of Jay, Oklahoma.

The following records represent the entire nesting season. On 25 May 1985, I heard a towhee singing in a location considerably south of where the 1977 and 1978 nests had been. This was my first early summer record in this locality during 10 years of observation. I was away from the Jay area during the entire month of June.

At 0502 on 9 July, Laurel K. Stevenson and I heard a towhee scolding in a patch of scrub oak-hickory woods west of the county road that transects our property. This upland timber bordered a deep ravine dominated by large oaks, elms and black gums (*Nyssa sylvatica*). South of the ravine a more open oak savanna completed the range which the birds occupied. The entire area encompassed about nine acres (22 hectares).

Both male and female birds were found close together. The male showed

very little white spotting on its back and wings, but the female was not seen well enough to determine her amount of spotting. Both birds began to move away from us and soon reached the north rim of the ravine. At 0724, we relocated them just south of the ravine where the male sang and then called several times. Between 0726 and 0825, one bird (sex unknown) called infrequently near the ravine, chiefly on the north side. At 0925 we departed.

On 10 July at 0453, the female towhee called several times from near the north edge of the ravine approximately 200 ft. (60 m) from the point where the birds had been found the previous day. The male towhee sang at the head of the ravine system about 500 ft. (150 m) from the road between 0459 and 0503. Intermittent singing and scolding were heard to the west and northwest in scrub woods from 0503 to 0528. Between 14 and 18 July, the male sang three or four mornings in the same location.

Four days later (22 July), a bird sang briefly from along the north rim of the wooded gully about 650–800 ft. (200–250 m) west of the earlier observation sites, from 0625 until 0644. Beginning at 0705, a towhee called from the south side of the same ravine for five minutes, then moved down into it a bit later. I saw the male again at 0749 near the place where it first sang.

At 0615 on 2 August, one towhee (sex uncertain) called a few times near a grassy opening around an old mobile home site about 900 ft. (275 m) southwest of where the earlier sightings had taken place.

A towhee called a few times each morning on 5, 11, and 28 August, and on 2 September near the mobile home area, then moved northward toward the ravine; it could not be located again. I did not, however, actually see a towhee on these dates. Although there were no further records, I believe that a pair of Rufous-sided Towhees attempted to nest in the area described above during 1985. — Frederick M. Baumgartner, *Route 2, Box 51A, Jay, Oklahoma 74346, 13 October 1985.*

Meadowlarks prey on Pine Siskins and American Goldfinches. — Starting at approximately 1330 on 4 February and continuing until 8 February 1985, I witnessed meadowlarks attacking and killing Pine Siskins (*Carduelis pinus*) and American Goldfinches (*C. tristis*) at a pole feeder in my front yard located 3 miles east of Wynnewood in Garvin County, southcentral Oklahoma. Prior to this date, I had not seen meadowlarks at my feeders, but after four days in which snow had accumulated to a depth of eight inches, there were several. Weather conditions during the five-day period of observation were severe. Daytime high temperatures dropped from 51°F on 30 January to 6°F the next day. By 3 February, the minimal temperature had reached -1°F. But a warming trend began on this date and lasted through 8 February, when temperatures climbed to 38°F. An additional two inches of snow fell on 5 February.

I watched intently as one meadowlark ran and pounced at the smaller birds; at least twice, they escaped. A captured bird was killed by pecks to the back of the head and then left intact while the meadowlark returned to the feeder and ate sunflower seeds scattered about on the ground. Later, the meadowlark came back, ate the brain first, and then the remainder of the carcass. Other meadowlarks also fed on the dead finches but were not observed to make

any attacks of their own. At the end of the first day, I counted 11 pine siskin carcasses, plus some unidentified wings.

On 5 February, one siskin and one goldfinch were found dead and on 6 February, the tally was four siskins and two goldfinches. Only two new carcasses were present on 7 February but they were so thoroughly eaten upon that identification was not possible. The last date on which I found dead finches was 8 February, when I saw one or two (they were not complete, having been heavily fed upon). Also on this date, one meadowlark took a carcass away from another, then carried it approximately two feet away before feeding upon it. After 8 February I saw no more carcasses and no meadowlark around the feeders.

I could determine neither whether these were Eastern or Western meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna* or *S. neglecta*) nor if only one meadowlark was responsible for killing the smaller birds. I did note, however, that several different meadowlarks partook of the finch carcasses.

Common Grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*) have been observed consuming goldfinches during a blizzard in Wichita Falls, Texas (Cummings, 1989, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 22:29–30) but few other instances are known of members of the blackbird family feeding on goldfinches (but see Messerly, 1979, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 12:6–7). On the other hand, meadowlarks attacked, killed and ate Tree Sparrows (*Spizella arborea*) in Osage County, Oklahoma, after a heavy snowstorm (Schrack, 1979, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 12:33–34). — Luann Sewell Waters, Box 457, Wynnewood, Oklahoma 73098, 1 January 1990.

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