

FIRST RECORD OF LITTLE GULL FOR OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN G. NEWELL

From 1 to 11 December 1990, a number of people had the rare experience of viewing an adult Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) in winter plumage at Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. The lake covers about four square miles and the small gull was usually out over the water, far from shore. Under such conditions, I feel fortunate to have ever noticed it. When I first spotted it in the cove east of my house, the diminutive gull was actively feeding with a group of 15 or more Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*). They were attempting to steal fish from a group of eight Red-breasted Mergansers (*Mergus serrator*) that were feeding in the channel running from a concrete drainage canal into Lake Hefner. The channel was visible only because of the very low level of the lake. The distance from my patio to that area is approximately 700 feet. Even so far away, and facing the morning sun, I could discern the blackish underwings of this bird. My wife Dorothy and I hurriedly contacted several other area bird observers, but none came that day to see the rare little gull. We feared that it might move on before others had a chance to see it.

The next day, I saw the Little Gull while standing by the dam wall on the west side of the lake. Again, the bird was feeding in the company of a loose flock of foraging Bonaparte's Gulls well out over the lake. Because it was so small, the Little Gull was readily lost from view among the waves where the other gulls were drifting along,



LITTLE GULL

Fig. 1. Note blackish undersurface and white trailing edge of the short, rounded wings (wingspan over six inches shorter than a Bonaparte's). Both photos taken at Lake Hefner, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on 8 December 1990; Fig. 1 by Jim Vicars, Fig. 2 by Mitchell Oliphant.

apparently following and diving into a school of fish. As it flew just above the water, the smaller gull frequently picked tidbits from the surface, even diving into the lake at times, and seemed to be more active than the larger gulls. I was reminded of my ocean trips and the little petrels, flying like butterflies over the waves, feeding as they moved.

On 6 December, I relocated the unusual gull, this time along the north shoreline of Prairie Dog Point on the west side of the lake. It was alternately fishing and resting near shore with a flock of about 35 Bonaparte's Gulls. On this date, the wind was from the north, blowing about 30 miles per hour, and the temperature was about 45° F. Several persons searched the lake for the Little Gull the next day, but apparently no one located it.

Oklahoma City Audubon Society members, preparing for the annual Christmas Bird Count to be held the following week, sponsored a field trip to Lake Hefner on 8 December. Having learned of the Little Gull, several people from other cities, including Bartlesville, Muskogee, Tulsa and Norman, were on hand, all desiring to find it. As far as I know, no one was disappointed. Everyone saw it well as it fed over slightly wind-rippled water at the north end of the lake with Bonaparte's and Ring-billed (*Larus delawarensis*) gulls and, surprisingly, an immature Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*). Jim Vicars took several photographs of it, as had Mitchell Oliphant earlier in the day (see cover photos). I located this extraordinary gull again on 9 December and finally again on the 11th. Each time seen, it was predictably associating with the larger gulls.

The foregoing constitutes the first documentation for this species in the state of Oklahoma. The Little Gull commonly breeds through much of Eurasia and since 1962 in the Great Lakes region and adjacent Canada. During winter, it occurs in the same general regions as well as along the U.S. Atlantic Coast and western Eurasia. It is "casual . . . in the interior . . . south to the Gulf coast (Texas east to western Florida), reported west to Colorado, Kansas and Missouri . . ." (American Ornithologists' Union, 1983, Check-list of North American birds, 6th ed., Lawrence, Kansas, p. 214).

In adjacent states during this same time period, single Little Gulls were reported from southwestern Arkansas (third state record; Amer. Birds 95:284, 1991) and Waco in central Texas (Amer. Birds 95:291, 1991), where it is considered to be "accidental" (Texas Ornithological Society, 1984, Checklist of the birds of Texas, 2nd ed., Austin). Hubbard (1978, Revised check-list of the birds of New Mexico, New Mexico Ornithol. Soc. Publ. No. 6) did not list it from New Mexico, nor did Thompson and Ely (1989, Birds in Kansas, Vol. 1, Univ. Kansas Mus. Nat. Hist. Public Educ. Ser. No. 11) in Kansas (but see AOU quote in above paragraph).

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## PRE-MIGRATORY ROOSTING BEHAVIOR OF SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHERS IN OKLAHOMA

BY JAMES H. WITTHGOTT

Premigratory roosting behavior of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*) is not thoroughly documented in the ornithological literature, despite the fact that it occurs regularly and provides a thought-provoking spectacle. I studied a roost containing nearly 900 birds in the late summer of 1990 in Wagoner, Muskogee

County, Oklahoma.

In 1990, an open grove of about 30 pin oaks (*Quercus palustris*) stood on a small plot of city park land at the west edge of Wagoner, near the junction of U.S. Highways 51 and 69. Behind it was the parking lot of a large Wal-Mart store, on the other sides, an assortment of businesses. For many miles in all directions, this was the busiest and most highly commercialized crossroads. The trees, all roughly 18 m tall and about 45 cm in diameter, were widely spaced over a lawn crisscrossed by short gravel roadways. Scattered among them were eight deciduous saplings and four evergreen shrubs. It was here, during the early fall of 1990, amid the glare of street lights and the noise and commotion of nighttime traffic, that hundreds of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, lesser numbers of Eastern Kingbirds (*Tyrannus tyrannus*), and about 50 House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) came to roost each night. Most birds selected the same eight or ten oaks in which to retire each evening.

Each morning the birds flew westward, dispersing to forage over large tracts of ranch and farming country. At evening, they returned to the roost from the same direction, noisily squabbling for perches in the trees before eventually settling in.

Data I kept for three mornings and two evenings between 26 and 29 August 1990 indicated that arrival and departure occurred within 45 minutes of sunset and sunrise, respectively. Some observations I made alone, but several others helped, including James and Marion Norman, Jeri McMahon, Jim Harmon, Jim Withgott and Lora M. Kepler.

During all three mornings, the flycatchers began calling rather suddenly from 50 minutes to an hour before sunrise. Vocalizations included single notes — *kip*, *kup*, or *tut*; throaty chortles; and a hurried ascending series of notes: *tut, tut, tut tut-tut chu-allee!* This latter call is widely noted in the literature as the species' "twilight song" (Nice, M.M., 1931, *Auk* 48:123-125). Fifteen to 25 minutes later, the first birds began to move about in the branches and make brief sorties out of the roost trees, as if exercising their wings. At approximately 15 minutes before sunrise, the first birds began to leave, many staging in several "launch trees" near the west end of the grove. On my first visit to the roost as it awakened, I was amazed that so many birds had emerged from a single tree, a few at a time, until the number had reached around 200. Before flying out, the Scissortails had been virtually impossible to see. By sunrise, almost all the birds had gone. Bailey (1902) described this same phenomenon in Texas.

The evening return flight appeared less hurried and was more prolonged. All birds had usually arrived at the roost before sunset.

During both departure and arrival periods, numerous flycatchers pursued one another in seeming playfulness. Scissortails and kingbirds followed after their own kind. Only one interspecific encounter was noted, a kingbird close on the heels of a Scissortail.

The roost did not contain equal numbers of birds each night. The mornings of 27 and 29 August and the evening of 29 August produced estimates of 750, 507, and 848 Scissortails and 80+, 149, and 112 Eastern Kingbirds, respectively. Counts made later by Marion Norman showed the roost to contain 358, 490, and 886 Scissortails respectively on 2, 3, and 10 September.

The roost appeared to be at the far eastern edge of an area collectively inhabited by these birds during the daytime. They evidently chose to travel some distance to

roost in Wagoner. This affinity for urban roost sites has also been noted at other Oklahoma localities.

A huge roost in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, has been observed for several years by Warren D. Harden and Richard L. Fry. Located along Hal Muldrow Drive, a block or so south of Main Street, it is within three blocks of one of the city's busiest intersections. In use for at least 10 years, and sometimes holding literally thousands of birds, this roost measured some 200 by 300 m and was composed of scattered mature black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) and cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) trees at least 13 m high. Residents of two apartment complexes nearby enjoyed watching the birds coming in to roost. In midsummer, the roost begins to build in numbers. Harden stated that each tree at darkness contains hundreds of birds with 10 to 15 large trees in full use, sometimes several hundred birds being in the air near a tree at one time. In addition to Scissortails, the roost hosts small numbers of other species, including Eastern and Western kingbirds (*Tyrannus tyrannus* and *T. verticalis*), Brown Thrashers (*Toxostoma rufum*), American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*), European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), and House Sparrows (pers. comm., W.D. Harden).

Frances Neeld has monitored fall aggregations of Scissortails in Duncan, Stephens County, southwestern Oklahoma. Flocks of 100 or more have roosted along Cotton Hills Drive in the northeast part of the city each fall since 1975.

In 1979, members of the Stephens County Audubon Society discovered a roost of nearly 1,000 birds in the big sycamores (*Platanus occidentalis*) and Eastern cottonwoods of Fuqua Park in the heart of Duncan. "Just before sundown they arrived, the waning rays of light setting aglow their salmon sides as they swung back and forth, jockeying for position in the dense foliage. They chattered incessantly. By sunset, the huge trees were virtually alive with noisy Scissortails, still fluttering about, attempting to locate more favorable perches. At intervals of less than a minute, two or three 'superflocks', — each containing hundreds of individuals — would swarm out from the trees and circle widely for several seconds while performing spectacular aerial acrobatics" (Neeld 1979). In October 1981, several members of the club counted approximately 600 birds. The last stragglers left on 24 October.

Little detailed information has been published relative to the roosting behavior of Scissortails. The most comprehensive account is that of Fitch (1950), who described the great autumn buildups of flycatchers as merely an extension of the species' normal roosting habits. Fitch pointed out that Scissortails roost gregariously throughout the winter, spring and fall in flocks mixed in age and sex. During the breeding season, however, territorial males leave nighttime nest incubation to their mates and repair to communal roosts consisting entirely of males and small numbers of unmated females.

Simmons (1925) and Sutton (1986) have noted that fall roosts often are located in towns. Simmons wrote of a Texas site: "Large droves roost in a huge old tree in the downtown alley to the rear of the very center of Austin's business district."

Sutton (1986) suggested that autumn roosting behavior may occur in part because of an unusual molt adult birds undergo at this time of year: they molt into fresh plumage after young have left the nest. It is during this feather exchange that the adults mingle with young birds in the great fall roosts.

It is tempting to speculate that roosting near towns offers some advantages to the species. Perhaps the illumination of city lights provides protection from nighttime

attack, while sentry birds watch for predators. However, two factors argue against this conclusion: 1) there would appear to be few nocturnal predators which pose any real threat, and 2) we found that walking through the Wagoner roost alarmed the birds only after they were awake anyway, and had no effect while it was dark.

It is also possible that nearby lights may provide some birds a nocturnal food source. Allan (1950) described a Scissortail flycatching at night by the light of a streetlamp. However, if this nocturnal foraging behavior was common enough to guide whole roosts toward light sources, then it would surely have been widely noted by now.

Preferred roosting sites seem to be open stands of medium to large sized deciduous trees that lack appreciable understory. Parks, orchards and residential plantings are therefore occasionally selected as roosts by Scissortails.

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161 BIRCH ROAD, LONGMEADOW, MASSACHUSETTS 01106, 4 DECEMBER 1990

### GENERAL NOTES

**Early nighthawk records for northcentral Texas and southwestern Oklahoma.** — G.M. Sutton (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Contrib. Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist. No. 1, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 22) listed 23 April as the earliest expected date of arrival for the Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), a transient and summer resident in Oklahoma, but also gave exceptional dates of 15 April for Cleveland County in the central part of the state, 18 April for western Oklahoma (Custer County), and one "puzzling" winter date of 30 December 1964 in Logan County, northcentral Oklahoma (1964, Aud. Field Notes 19:272).

Since 1981, several other early sightings have been made in the southwest Oklahoma — northcentral Texas region, a few exceptionally early. On 14 February 1991, for instance, one of us (McKee) was leaving work at 1735 in downtown Wichita Falls, Wichita County, Texas, when she heard overhead the familiar "beerrt" call of a Common Nighthawk. Looking up, she briefly glimpsed a bird the shape and size of a nighthawk. Before it disappeared over a building, she noted the conspicuous white wingband about halfway between the wrist and wingtip of each wing. The weather was clear with a temperature of 67° F. On 26 February 1982, one was seen and heard by D. Williams in Wichita Falls (The Cardinal 10 (3):1, 1982). In consulting a checklist of the birds of northcentral Texas (Zinn, K.S., and N. Moore, 1976, privately published), she found that on 15 March, 1975, Leroy and Lafayette Stankewitz saw one in Wichita County. W.M. Pulich (1988, The birds of north central Texas, Texas A & M Univ. Press,

College Station, pp. 182-183) gave 23 April as the earliest date known for Wichita County.

For southwest Oklahoma, Tyler (1979, *Birds of southwestern Oklahoma*, Contrib. Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist. No. 2, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 29) listed 18 April as the earliest date for this species. He mentioned another very early sighting on 14 March 1975, by John W. Ault 1 mile north of Indianola, Comanche County (Ault, 1978, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 11:7). In his personal field notes, Tyler has also recorded several other unusual dates for northward migrating nighthawks, primarily through personal communication with competent observers. On the very early date of 20 February 1986, Debi Clark, a volunteer worker at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Comanche County, reported seeing a nighthawk there that was flying about 10 feet aboveground. Though she discerned the white wingspots, she failed to note how close to the wingtips they were. This record was rejected by the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee for lack of accompanying details. A graduate student from Oklahoma State University, Allen Ratzlaff, recounted both seeing and *hearing* a nighthawk at Fort Sill on 12 March 1985. On 3 April 1974, refuge biologist Chris Enright *heard* one calling there. On the same day in 1990, Randy Stoltenberg discovered the earliest bird of the season in southwest Lawton, Comanche County; he failed to hear it call. One day and one year later, Gerard A. Clyde, Jr., observed a nighthawk near Headrick in Jackson County, but at a considerable distance. In four of five other records spanning the period between 13 and 19 April (1981-1990; four in Comanche County, one in Caddo County), nighthawks were sighted only, but on 16 April 1986, Toni Montaperto of the Fort Sill Wildlife Division *heard* one there.

A majority of these early records were of birds that were seen but not heard. Because most Oklahoma observers were unfamiliar with the voice, behavior and field marks of the Lesser Nighthawk (*C. acutipennis*), it is possible that some of these unusually early migrants were of that species. It has been collected once in the far western Oklahoma panhandle (23 April 1961; Davis 1962, *Wilson Bull.* 74:287-288); paradoxically, a juvenile bird in the U.S. National Museum was ostensibly collected in Tulsa County on 15 June 1933 (Dickerman, R.W., 1986, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 19:1-2). However, the Lesser Nighthawk has not been recorded in northcentral Texas.

Known as the Lesser, Trilling, or Texas Nighthawk, *C. acutipennis* breeds in open dry regions of the southwestern United States. The nesting record closest to Oklahoma was apparently in the southcentral part of Texas in Kerr County (Oberholser, H.C., 1974, *The bird life of Texas*, Univ. Texas Press, Austin, p. 473). It characteristically flies quite low to the ground, occasionally emitting "purring" or trilling, toadlike calls and its white bands are closer to the wingtip than are the Common's. Very early or exceptionally late nighthawks in the region should be examined critically for these traits, for there are too many recent unseasonal records to be dismissed offhand. — Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505*, and Terry McKee, *1202 Sunnyside, Wichita Falls, Texas 76303, 2 May 1991*.

**First record of Northern Wheatear in Arkansas.** — The Northern Wheatear, *Oenanthe oenanthe*, is a sparrow-sized thrush of arctic barrens. The eastern form nests in northern Canada and is a widespread breeder on the coast of Greenland and throughout much of Eurasia. North American birds migrate across the Atlantic and winter in the Old World. However, some waifs occasionally show up in the eastern United States, and there is one record for Colorado (AOU Check-list of North American birds, 6th ed., 1983, p. 548). One such stray was discovered on 18 October 1990 in

southwestern Arkansas by Max and Helen Parker and Curtis Marantz (Amer. Birds 45:117, 1991). The location was near Ashdown, Arkansas, on the east side of Millwood Reservoir at the Okay boat landing, only about 30 miles from Oklahoma.

On 19 October 1990, Vera Jennings of Muskogee, Oklahoma, informed me of this discovery. Because I was only a short distance away, I immediately drove to Lake Millwood. Arriving at the Okay boat landing a little before dark, I soon located the rather tame bird and photographed it as it bobbed and flitted about a rock dike about a half-mile from the boat ramp. An immature individual of the eastern form, it was almost entirely buff in color, and had a conspicuous white rump. The black part of its otherwise white tail formed a distinct inverted "T." A black shrike-like mask was also quite noticeable.

The Wheatear was observed from 18 to 22 October and was the first for Arkansas. During the autumn of 1990, an amazing 16 Northern Wheatears were recorded in the United States, most along the northeastern coast. This species is rarely encountered so far inland as Illinois and Arkansas (see Amer. Birds 45:63-64, 1991).

Thus far, there is no record for Oklahoma, but field observers should check carefully for it during fall migration, particularly in open rocky habitat. — Jeffrey D. Webster, 3131 N. First, Apt H-2, Durant, Oklahoma 74701, 17 May 1991.

**Varied Thrush in Rogers County, Oklahoma.** — On our large wooded acreage 6 miles south of Chelsea in Rogers County, northeastern Oklahoma, my husband J. Walter and I discovered a Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*) on 25 November 1990. At about 1630, we were closing a gate when we noticed the unusual bird not far away on a limb next to an eastern red cedar tree (*Juniperus virginiana*). We both studied it carefully in good light through our binoculars for about five minutes. The bird resembled an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) except for its two orangish wingbars and an eyestripe of similar color, the solid orange throat, and a distinctive black band across the upper chest, a mark of the male bird. Eventually, the thrush flitted into the juniper, apparently to roost.

On 26 November, only one among a party of four persons, after having searched for three hours in a light rain, was fortunate enough to see the Varied Thrush well enough for identification. Jeri A. McMahon finally saw it near where we had, and at about the same time of day. It was not seen thereafter. This sighting was reported in American Birds (1991, Vol 45:124).

This species is a denizen of moist conifer forests in the northwestern states. It breeds from there northward through western Canada and most of Alaska. The winter range extends southward along the Pacific coast from Alaska to northern Baja California (American Ornithologists' Union, 1983, Check-list of North American birds, 6th ed., Allen Press, Lawrence, Kansas).

There is but one other Oklahoma record: between 11 December 1977 and 10 January 1978, a Varied Thrush was viewed by numerous bird enthusiasts in Mohawk Park, Tulsa, Tulsa County. Possibly another bird was discovered there on 12 February 1978 (Tomer, J. S., 1978, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 11:25-26). — Margaret Davis, R.R. 1, Box 202-1, Chelsea, Oklahoma 74016, 10 February 1991.

**FROM THE EDITOR** — Years ago, Dr. George M. Sutton predicted that the Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) would someday be found nesting in western Oklahoma. That prediction has come to pass. In a recent issue of *The Wilson Bulletin* (103:305-308, 1991), Dr. Roger Boyd of Baker University in Baldwin County, Kansas, has published a note documenting the first nest at Optima Reservoir in Texas County during the spring of 1987. He found both parents with four chicks on 17 June. The young birds were measured, photographed and released. Nearby, the presumed nest scrape was located. On 26 June, only one adult and two juveniles could be found. When he last checked on 7 July, Boyd saw no plovers, and assumed that none of the young had fledged.

On 25 June the following year, Mark Eddings, a ranger at Optima Lake, discovered a nest with four eggs in the same area. He, Patricia Cefalli and John S. Shackford also found three adult plovers, one of which Shackford photographed at the nest. This nest was unsuccessful, for torrential rains in early July inundated the sandbar it was on; neither eggs nor young would have survived.

During 1988 and 1989, water levels in the lake rose several feet higher than 1987, and all suitable nesting habitat (i.e., gravelly sandbars) was flooded. No adults were seen at Optima Reservoir in 1989 and 1990.

These breeding records are noteworthy for two other reasons. First, they extend the known breeding range southward approximately 490 km (305 mi.). Second, they are apparently the first instances in which the Piping Plover has nested within the breeding range of the Snowy Plover (*C. alexandrinus*).

The ornithological diversity of Oklahoma is amazing: while Anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*) and Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (*Picoides borealis*) nest in the humid southeastern lowlands, Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*), Vermilion Flycatchers (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) and Piping Plovers breed in the arid high country of the far northwest.

Are our wanderings after birds in vain? Nay, and may their wonder never wane!

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