

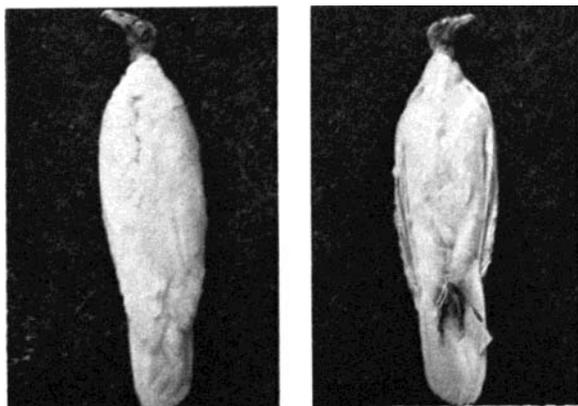
A RECORD OF COMPLETE ALBINISM IN A  
TURKEY VULTURE FROM OKLAHOMA

BY STEVEN R. SHEFFIELD

Thorough reviews of albinism in North American birds were conducted by Ross (1963) and Gross (1965). They found that records of complete, or total, albinism, which is characterized by white feathers, pink or red eyes, and very pale or white legs and bill, are much rarer than those of incomplete albinism. Among the 1847 occurrences reported by Gross (1965), only 7% were totally albinistic. Furthermore, instances of this phenomenon among birds of prey are comparatively rare, particularly in vultures. This paper documents the first known record of complete albinism in the Family Cathartidae.

On 8 January 1992, I discovered a white Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) specimen (OSU No. 2510) in the Oklahoma State University Museum in Stillwater (Figs. 1 and 2). It was an adult, but the sex had not been determined. It was probably prepared by Dale Long, whose name appears on the oversized label. This bird had been shot about 4 miles west of Aline, in Alfalfa County, Oklahoma, on 18 September 1979 and brought, still alive, to the nearby Great Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge. It was forcibly fed and dusted with pesticide due to its heavy infestation of lice. The next morning the vulture was dead. Its weight was 929 g., and measurements (in mm) were: total length 679, wingspan 1678, wing 508, tail 265, tarsus 64.2, culmen 58.9, and middle toe 95.4. Eye color was noted as pink, bill and talons white, legs tannish-white and the scattered small head feathers were white.

ALBINO TURKEY VULTURE



Dorsal (left) and ventral (right) sides of a complete albino Turkey Vulture (OSU No. 2510) from Alfalfa County, Oklahoma. Photos by the author.

Of the few known records of albinism for North American vultures, Gross (1965) listed 12, while Ross (1963) mentioned one for the Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) and eight for *Cathartes aura*. These records overlap to some extent and almost without exception were sightings; few albinistic specimens exist in museum collections. The Black Vulture was reported to be an "unmistakable albino" but, because it was a visual record, there was no way to determine whether this bird was a complete albino or not. Of the Turkey Vulture records, six were sightings of partial albinos, including those published by Allaire (1977), Jones (1933), and Nicholson (1896), one was a light gray imperfect albino specimen in the United States National Museum, and another a completely white study skin housed in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH No. 2804). This latter specimen bears no information except the donor's name, but is thought to have been obtained in the 1870s (M. LeCroy, pers. comm.). Again, its degree of albinism cannot be ascertained because the eye color was not recorded.

Since the reviews by Ross (1963) and Gross (1965), other sight records of albinistic Turkey Vultures have been given by Davis (1970) and Voelker (1976), respectively. The former record was of an incomplete albino captured on 29 August 1970 in Mount Sterling, Illinois. It was completely white, but had dark eyes. This bird was found alongside a road unable to fly. For several days it was maintained in captivity and was dusted with DDT to treat its louse infestation before being released. Voelker's (1976) bird had a white tail and scattered white feathers on the body.

Albinism results from a genetic change that inhibits the formation of the enzyme tyrosinase which is responsible for the synthesis of melanin. Complete albinos often have weak eyesight due to lack of depth perception, and brittle wing and tail feathers, which may impede their ability to fly. Frequently, they are harassed by conspecifics, are more conspicuous to predators than normally pigmented birds, and are thought to be at a disadvantage in mate selection (Witkop, 1975; Terres, 1980). These factors lead to a decreased survival rate among total albinos in the wild (Witkop, 1975).

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## GENERAL NOTES

**Wintering Black-crowned Night-Herons in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.**—It has been my experience during the past several years that the last Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) to leave Oklahoma City's Lake Hefner in late fall have been young-of-the-year. I became aware of these lingering individuals as they winged overhead at dusk or when they flew down the canal southeast of my home by the lake. At times of poor light, I identified them only as "night herons" by their characteristic "squawks." However, I have never seen Yellow-crowned Night-Herons (*N. violaceus*) during late fall.

During the autumn of 1991, I noticed them more frequently. Each bird that I flushed during the day proved to be immature, and I suspected that the others in the vicinity were also.

On 3 January 1992, Deloris Isted and several other people came to Lake Hefner hoping to find a Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisagens*) that had been present there the previous day. Although we were disappointed in not finding the grebe, we did flush an immature Black-crowned Night-Heron from a cove southeast of my home. On 26 January, I again flushed an immature night heron and this time saw it well enough for positive identification. Six days later (1 February), Patti Muzny, Esther Key and Judi Flannigan flushed a young night heron near the same cove. I happened by, and we all observed the bird through spotting scopes under good light conditions. It was definitely a Black-crown. Judi, who first spied it, reported that she had earlier that day seen two night herons there.

According to the *Date guide to the occurrence of birds in Oklahoma* (Grzybowski, J.A., et al., 1992, 2nd Ed., Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc., Norman, Oklahoma), normal dates that the species has been recorded span the period 17 March through 22 October. There are several mid-winter records for the Salt Plains Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County and one for Payne County (Sutton, G.M., 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 36). Black-crowned Night-Herons have also begun to linger in the Wichita Falls region of north central Texas within recent years (see McKee, D., 1992, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 25:3-4). I suspect that the late occurrences in both areas were related to unseasonably warm winters during which local streams and ponds remained unfrozen. Furthermore, I suspect that there are other areas in the region where this species occasionally stays over during the winter months. More investigation is needed.—John G. Newell, 8304 Lakeaire Dr., Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73132, 11 March 1992.

**First record of Glossy Ibis in Tulsa County, Oklahoma.**—From 6 to 9 October 1991, a Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) fed and roosted at three sewage lagoons located 9 miles north and 4 miles east of downtown Tulsa, Tulsa County, Oklahoma. These settling ponds, near U.S. Highway 75 on 97th Street North, support luxuriant stands of cattails and some willows in addition to numerous other emergent and floating aquatic plants. The central basin was almost dry except for a few shallow pools and the surrounding mudflats were covered with decaying vegetation. It was here that the ibis spent most of its time, apparently finding adequate invertebrate life on which to feed.

On the morning of 6 October, several persons, including the authors, Deloris J. Isted and Juanita V. Martin, observed the ibis from about 1000 to 1100, sometimes from as

close as 30 feet. In bright light, we studied it carefully through 10X binoculars and 30X telescopes. It differed from the closely-related White-faced Ibis (*P. chihi*) by having a pale line on the gray facial skin (not the edges of the feathers) extending from bill to eye and by its dark brown, rather than red, eye color. We concluded that this bird was indeed a Glossy Ibis in basic (winter) plumage, a much rarer species in Oklahoma than the White-faced.

Among several others who viewed this bird were Melinda M. Droege, James C. Hoffman, Steve Metz, Terry L. Mitchell, John S. Tomer and Don W. Verser. It was last seen by Tomer on the afternoon of 9 October. Photographs were taken by Seibert, Metz, Tomer and Verser. Several of these, together with extensive written documentation, were accepted by the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee, and a photograph by Metz was printed in *American Birds* (1992, Vol. 46, p. 114).

This apparently constitutes the first record for Tulsa County and only the second documented for Oklahoma. Two Glossy Ibises were identified by James C. Hoffman on 21 September 1980 at Lake Keystone in Pawnee County (Tulsa Audubon Society records).—Patricia L. Seibert, 2145 South Florence Ave., Tulsa, Oklahoma 74114 and Jo Loyd, 6736 East 28th St., Tulsa, Oklahoma 74129, 11 February 1992.

**An unusual gull-crow encounter.**—During the midmorning of 9 March 1991, I observed an interesting interaction between up to three Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) and an American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*).

The day was clear but cool and I was watching an American Crow flying across Lake Yahola from northeast to southwest. As it passed near several Ring-bills milling about a pier, one of the gulls began to give chase. The gull dove at the crow, forcing it toward the lake's surface. This behavior was repeated a few times when, suddenly, the two species began to reverse roles every few dives. This strange pursuit continued as the two large birds circled back toward the pier. When they passed by the group of gulls, two more gulls joined in the chase. On this circuit, the three gulls generally took turns swooping at the crow. Only occasionally did the crow dive toward a gull.

Once more, the group circled back to the pier. The two late-joining gulls dropped out, leaving just the crow and the original gull. These two started to make a loop over the lake, but at about the halfway point, the gull abruptly broke off the chase and rejoined the other gulls. At this juncture, the crow flew arrow-straight toward the west, directly away from the pier, and disappeared.

This whole episode lasted about five minutes. At no time did I observe one bird actually strike another, nor would I characterize their behavior as clearly "aggressive" at any point during the encounter. None of the dives resembled those used to mob an intruder to drive it away, nor did the bird in front ever attempt to escape by swift, direct flight away from its pursuer.

Little information on this subject has been reported in the literature. Tangren (*West. Birds* 13 (1-4):7, 1982) studied comparative feeding behavior among three species of gulls and Northwestern Crows (*C. caurinus*) on a Puget Sound beach in Washington state during the nonbreeding season. His conclusion was that a dominance hierarchy had become established with the larger of the species dominating the smaller. Glaucous-winged Gulls (*L. glaucescens*; average length 26 in.), sometimes attempted to steal food from the crows (average length 17.5 in.), but on two occasions crows chased away single gulls that landed in their midst as they fed. Once, a crow grabbed one of

the big gull's wings in its beak and pulled at it.

Altman (*Condor* 58:241–253, 1956) quoted Hartley's definition of "mobbing" as a "demonstration made by a bird against a potential or supposed enemy belonging to another and more powerful species and is not a reaction to an attack upon the person, mate, nest, eggs, or young." What I saw, therefore, did not appear to be typical mobbing behavior, but more like play.—Jimmy Woodard, *Rt. 4, Box 76, Sand Springs, Oklahoma 74063*, 30 March 1992.

**Late nesting of Greater Roadrunner in Carter County, Oklahoma.**—For approximately 12 years, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Reeves watched the comings and goings of one to several Greater Roadrunners (*Geococcyx californianus*) around their home 3 miles west of Healdton in Carter County, south central Oklahoma. They strongly suspected that the birds were nesting. It was not until 7 August 1991, however, that they actually discovered a nest. On 22 August, Sylvia E. England found that the nest held two eggs; perched on a nearby limb was an almost-fledged young roadrunner. The nest had been constructed about halfway up a 15-foot Scotch pine growing along a fence row of the back yard between the house and an often-travelled oilfield road nearby. The spacious enclosed yard contained four dogs, five domestic geese, and two ducks, all roaming freely. An orchard and vegetable garden 200 feet from the nest provided the roadrunners insects and an occasional lizard. Open blackjack and post oak scrub woods were predominant around the property.

The eggs failed to hatch. The last date on which the adults were noticed in the vicinity of the nest was 1 September. However, Mrs. Reeves saw a group of five or six roadrunners near her back yard in late September, indicating that three or four young birds probably fledged before the nest was found (assuming that this was the same family of birds). Sutton (*in Bent, A. C., 1940, Life histories of North American cuckoos, goatsuckers, hummingbirds and their allies*, Pt. 1, Bull. U.S. Natl. Mus. 176, p. 40) stated that three to six eggs are normally laid by *Geococcyx*, but as few as two or as many as 12 may complete a set. It is also well known that the young develop differentially.

The latest nestings recorded in Oklahoma for the roadrunner were on 7 August 1959, when G. M. Sutton found three almost fledged young in McClain County and on 3 August 1955, when Otis M. King reported that a Custer County nest contained five young: two large and vigorous, one small and weak, two small and dead (Sutton, G. M., 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 245). R. H. Thomas discovered a nest near Morrilton, central Arkansas, on 23 August 1965 from which the three young fledged on 15, 18 and 22 September (Sutton 1967, loc. cit.).

Nests are usually situated in low trees, thickets, or clumps of cactus three to 15 feet from the ground. In the Black Mesa country of the far western Oklahoma Panhandle, G. M. Sutton and John B. Semple found several nests in the 1930s that had been built in small one-seeded junipers growing on the mesa sides (Sutton *in Bent*, 1940, loc. cit.). But we could find no mention in the published record of pines being used for nesting.—Frances Neeld, 1219 Elder, *Duncan, Oklahoma 73533* and Sylvia E. England, *Rt. 3, Box 55E, Duncan, Oklahoma 73533*, 31 July 1992.

**Early and late dates for Scissor-tailed flycatchers in southwestern Oklahoma.**—According to J.D. Tyler (1979, *Birds of southwestern Oklahoma*, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 32), Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (*Tyrannus forficatus*) have been noted in the southwestern counties of Oklahoma from 27 March to 13 November. There is one winter record: a single bird was observed by Dorothy A. Paul in Duncan, Stephens County, on 22 February 1966.

At 1805 on 15 March 1982, during a Cameron University ornithology class trip led by Tyler, several students, including Mike N. Granger, Mike England, Rich Heavin and Steve Wallace, got good looks at a long-tailed male Scissortail as it flew out over a badly eroded mesquite-covered pasture 4 miles west of Olustee, in Jackson County, Oklahoma. The day was gusty, with southwest winds of 20-25 mph stirring much dust into the air.

On 8 March 1983, Fonda K. Bryce, a volunteer worker at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Comanche County, watched a male Scissortail fly across the scenic highway one mile south of refuge headquarters. She was driving a school bus when she spotted the bird at 0735. Its "orangish" axillar markings and long, forked tail in particular impressed her, but she also noticed its ash-colored back. This is nearly three weeks earlier than Tyler's (1979, *loc. cit.*) earliest date, based on area records since the mid-1950s. Three years later and one day earlier, on 7 March 1986, Earlene Cooper saw one in her yard 2½ miles east of Cache in Comanche County.

A recent fall sighting is exactly one week later than Tyler's (1979, *loc. cit.*) latest record. On 20 November 1983, Jim Bob Wilson, a Cameron University student, noticed a long-tailed male on a highline wire 2 miles north and a half mile west of Blair, in Jackson County. Still one day later, in 1987, the author and Jack and Gary Orr saw a female on an electrical line at an abandoned homesite 3 miles north and 3 east of Tipton in Tillman County.

G.M. Sutton (1979, *A check-list of Oklahoma birds*, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 25) gives 23 March as the earliest date in spring (Love County) and two exceptionally late fall dates of 14 (Okmulgee County) and 27 November (Pittsburg County). Most birds depart southwest Oklahoma by late September, but stragglers usually persist until late in October. The average arrival date in the area (1938-74) was 4 April and the median date for the last fall sighting (1965-73) was 25 October (Tyler, 1979 *loc. cit.*).—Jack D. Tyler, *Department of Biological Sciences, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 28 April 1988.*

**Black-and-white Warbler nest failure in Pontotoc County, Oklahoma.**—On 14 June 1992, while Mickle Duggan and I were checking the status of a nest box on my ranch at Oakman, in Pontotoc County, south central Oklahoma, our attention was drawn to a mixed-species flock of scolding birds nearby. This part of the state is characterized by open stretches of pastureland interspersed with stands of blackjacks and postoaks. Fire suppression has led to an invasion of eastern redcedars. Noisily moving about in one of these were a Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), a White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*), two Tufted Titmice (*Parus bicolor*) and three Carolina Chickadees (*P. carolinensis*). After a brief search of the tree, we noticed a small black ratsnake (*Elaphe obsoleta*) resting on a limb near the main trunk about 3 m (10 ft.) up. It had eaten recently, for there was a large bulge just beyond its neck.

Within a few minutes, Mickle had dislodged the snake from the tree. It was only 60

cm (23 in.) long. I palpated the food-lump forward, forcing the snake to disgorge its recent meal. The first item was an adult female Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*), followed by two Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) eggs.

Although I have recorded the Black-and-white Warbler in Pontotoc County from 13 March (1967, 1971) to 30 September (1967), no nesting has been documented. While we looked in vain for a nest on the ground under and near the cedar, we did find a small white eggshell with numerous reddish-brown specks concentrated at the larger end, and a hole in one side. Sprunt (*in* Griscom, L., and A. Sprunt, Jr., 1979, *The warblers of America*, Doubleday & Co., rev. ed., E. M. Reilly, Jr., ed., p. 36) described the eggs of this species: "Ground color, white or creamy, profusely spotted and speckled with reddish-brown and lavender, often in the form of a wreath about the large end. Some specimens are very evenly marked over entire surface."

I suspect that the following took place: a female cowbird ejected one or more warbler eggs while laying her own in the warbler nest (the same cowbird may well have laid both eggs, as they were identically marked). The cowbird eggs showed no sign of embryonic development, indicating recent deposition. This fact, together with the fragile warbler eggshell, suggested that the nest was nearby. Because the cowbird's eggs had been swallowed before the warbler, the snake probably discovered the nest, engulfed both eggs, then captured the warbler as she re-entered the nest and/or attempted to drive the snake away. Several years of personal observation have convinced me that black ratsnakes are the most common local nest predator and that they often remain for a time in the nest after feeding.

G. M. Sutton (1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 488) observed that no record exists for cowbird parasitism of Black-and-white Warbler nests in Oklahoma. Although the evidence presented above is circumstantial, it is doubtful that the cowbird eggs could have come from any nest other than the warbler's. The Black-and-white Warbler is only occasionally victimized by the Brown-headed Cowbird according to Friedmann (1963, *Host relations of the parasitic cowbirds*, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 233, p. 91) and Friedmann, et al. (1977, *A further contribution to knowledge of the host relations of the parasitic cowbirds*, *Smithson. Contr. Zool.* 235, p. 26).—William A. Carter, Department of Biology, East Central University, Ada, Oklahoma 74820, 14 July 1992.

**Bachman's Sparrow in the Oklahoma Ozarks.**—In a riparian woodland below the Fort Gibson Reservoir dam 4 miles north of the town of Fort Gibson, in Cherokee County, northeastern Oklahoma, six members of the Indian Nations Audubon Society observed a Bachman's Sparrow (*Aimophila aestivalis*) on 17 September 1991. Skies were overcast that day, with temperatures in the 70s (°F) and a light wind.

A path we took near the Grand River was overgrown, but to one side was an open woodland bordering a brushy field. Although burned two years earlier, this opening was now carpeted with dense ground cover.

About 1015, we heard a soft, subdued song emanating from the open area and repeated often. Even veteran bird student James L. Norman did not immediately recognize it: a long, clear note, then a variable trill. Finally, Jim Harman located the little bird perched on a low shrub. Although we could tell that it was a sparrow, it was rather nondescript and remained in shadow, rendering identification difficult. We did note its rather large size, flattened forehead, unstreaked breast, and fairly long, rounded tail.

For about 15 minutes we watched this bird. Several times it flew down to the path in

front of us, running in and out of the brush. On an exposed branch about 10 feet up, it finally remained long enough for close study. The large bill was accentuated by a darker upper mandible and a dark line that extended through the eye widened posteriorly. Two reddish (or purplish-brown) streaks extended along the crown, several others down the back. The buffy breast contrasted with a lighter belly and darker tail. The legs were noticeably orange.

We all agreed that this bird was a Bachman's Sparrow. Upon returning to the cars, we played the song of this species on a tape recorder: it matched closely what we had just heard. Other observers present were Vera Jennings, Elsie Stubbs and Steve Crank.

Bachman's Sparrow is a nonmigratory species reported chiefly from southeastern and south central Oklahoma counties (see Carter, W. A., 1966, *Wilson Bull.* 78:475-476; 1970, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 3:9-14; 1971, *Amer. Birds* 25:77; G. M. Sutton [1982], Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman). This is apparently the first documentation for the Ozark uplift region of northeast Oklahoma.—Jeri A. McMahon, 311 Bayou Road, Fort Gibson, Oklahoma 74434, 10 July 1992.

**From the Editor**—In October 1991, two captive-hatched California Condors were placed back into the wild in Los Padres National Park, Ventura County, California. They are the first in the wild since early 1987, when the last remaining condor was captured. The two were accompanied by two Andean Condors and allowed to acclimate while being fed chopped rats and horsemeat until 14 January 1992, when they were set free. Six more birds may be released in the fall of 1992.

The Endangered Species Act is up for reauthorization by Congress. Write or call your congressman urging support of HB 4045 (Studds, MA), which is supported by more than 30 representatives. Oppose any bill that would weaken the ESA. You may call 1-202-224-3121 and ask for your representative by name.

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