

# The LINNAEAN NEWS-LETTER



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## STRANGE ORIOLE IN LOWER MANHATTAN

On 8 Dec. 1964 a peculiar oriole was found at Stuyvesant Oval in lower Manhattan by J. Porter Reilly and Bertha Brenner. It was seen repeatedly thereafter until 18 Jan. 1965, when it was found dead. In the interim Ken Chambers reported seeing two such birds. The fate of the second one is unknown. The bird was described as looking like a giant immature Orchard Oriole. It was suggested that it was a Troupial. The bird was correctly identified by Fred Heath as a Lichtenstein's Oriole (Black-throated Oriole is perhaps a better common name when applied to the species as a whole). This was a rather remarkable bit of field identification, considering the condition of the bird's plumage. In the normal wild state the bird is patterned quite like the Hooded Oriole but is a deeper orange, is much larger, and has an orange shoulder. The immatures are somewhat---but not much---yellower and sometimes have olive rather than black backs. The bird at Stuyvesant Oval, while having the pattern of black exactly like that of an adult, was almost uniformly dull olive-green on the bright parts of its plumage. There were a few brighter feathers, visible mostly on the sides of the breast when the bird was in the hand, that were probably concealed in the field.

The specimen was brought to the American Museum of Natural History, where the identification was made positive by John Bull when he discovered the bird had palatal knob, a condition no other

oriole possesses. Since this is a non-migratory species, ranging no closer than the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, and since there are a few bird dealers in lower Manhattan that handle tropical orioles on occasion, it is assumed that the bird was an escape. I examined the specimen to try to determine what caused the alteration of color. While red, orange, or yellow birds often fade considerably in captivity due to dietary factors and some melanin-based colors also disappear, melanin does not appear where there normally is none. (An olive-green effect in feathers is produced by darker melanins overlying the yellow carotenoids in the feather.) Seeing the few bright feathers on the sides of this bird, I suggested that it might be somewhat sooted and should be washed. The effect of washing was dramatic. All traces of olive or green vanished and became pale yellow, thus producing a bird in perfect pattern with the normally bright orange areas faded to light yellow, a not unusual occurrence in captivity. The interesting point is that plain old-fashioned city soot and dirt produced the same color effect that melanin in the feathers would have done.

The washing was observed by Mr. Bull and was done with lukewarm water and a detergent (alcorox) and then with gasoline. All the cleaning action was accomplished by the water and detergent. Neither the color of the bird nor that of the gasoline changed in the second washing.

---Dick Ryan

## WHITE PHASE GYRFALCON IN ITHACA, N.Y.

The occurrence of a Gyrfalcon anywhere in the United States outside of Alaska is of note, and birds of the white, high-Arctic phase are so rarely recorded south of Canada that it is worth describing in words and pictures one seen in Ithaca, Tompkins County, N.Y., on 24 Feb. 1965.

At about 9:15 A.M. that day I received a phone call that a white Gyrfalcon was perched in a tree in back of the Laboratory of Ornithology and had been stooping on the ducks for ten minutes. Tim Zorach and I arrived in record time to find fifteen or twenty people staring out the big plate glass windows at a large white hawk that was watching the ducks on the pond. It was sitting about sixty feet up in a dead elm, about 300 feet from the building. I put the telescope on it to make sure it (1) was really a falcon (it was), (2) wasn't an albino Peregrine (it wasn't) or (3) didn't have jesses, the falconer's hallmark (it didn't). It really was a white phase Gyrfalcon.

As we were watching, it took off straight for the windows, the open water patch---twenty feet or so in diameter---and the few hundred Mallards and Black Ducks in it. Any of the latter who had previously been unaware of the hawk's presence weren't now. As it dropped down in a half-hearted stoop, the ducks suddenly surged together as if they were iron filings and the center of the open water a huge magnet. It all happened in a few seconds, and some of the ducks even foolishly started to fly up a few feet, until the hawk was directly over them, ten feet in the air. It was heading for the windows, when it stopped in mid-air, hovering like a hummingbird---its wings held vertically while fanning the air. After two or three seconds it flew (see picture #1) to an elm fifty feet from the window, then returned to its original perch (see picture #2). It stooped on the ducks six or seven times, never getting one, but never really seeming to try. At one point three or four Blacks flew in from the northwest, appearing unaware of what spotted them at some distance and followed their every movement until they were on the water.

Finally, at about 10:30 A.M., after some thirty people had been watching the Gyrfalcon for an hour and a half, it took off southwest, over the woods, and began to gain altitude, gliding in lazy circles



just as Peregrines do. It finally straightened its course and flew out of sight to the southwest. What appears to have been the same bird was seen again by Walter Benning in Clyde, Wayne County, N.Y., a few miles northwest of Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge and about fifty air miles north-north-west of Ithaca, on 7 Mar. 1965. He watched it for ten minutes as it rested atop a telephone pole. It has not been reported since by anyone.

This spectacular bird was almost snow white unless you looked closely. There was a suggestion of a stripe behind the eye, not a Peregrine's vertical hash-mark but a Prairie Falcon's eyestripe-like smear. The back was lightly flecked with brownish, not black, feather edgings and looked like the back of a second-year Iceland Gull. The trailing edge of the wing also was brownish-flecked. The tail and leg feathering appeared pure white, and, especially when the bird was overhead, very dark tips to the first five primaries could be seen. The feet and legs were slaty blue-gray, as was the bill, which had a dark tip and cere. The eye was completely dark. Eckelberry's illustration of Plate 40 of Pough's "Audubon Water Bird Guide" is nearest the bird we saw, although the dark markings on the back were brownish, not black, and nowhere nearly as extensive as he shows.

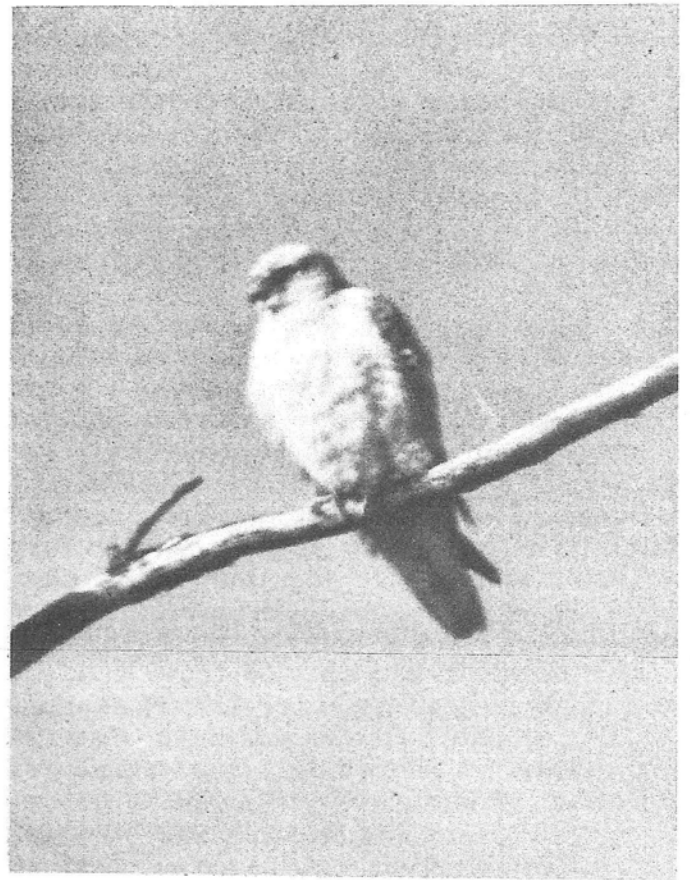
For those who contemplate seeing a

white Gyrfalcon in the future and want to compare notes, I offer the following. Most impressive was the bird's size. When the bird was sitting in a tree it looked longer than a Red-tail. Its tail was very long, and it kept jerking it like a Sparrow Hawk does or bending it almost under the limb on which it was perched. Most of the people who saw it felt that this was a balancing maneuver against the strong wind that day. When the wind let up, there were no tail jerks. The wings were very long and exceptionally broad front-to-back, suggesting those of a Red-shouldered Hawk. When the bird was resting its wings extended half the tail length.

In the air the Gyrfalcon beat its wings deeply but deceptively slowly, crossing the pond very rapidly. The whole bird was strangely reminiscent of an Iceland Gull; in fact, when first seen at some distance, it was thought to be a Ring-bill. When the bird was flying away from me it suggested a huge white Peregrine with exceptionally broad wings and even had the slight upwardly curved effect a Peregrine's wings give when seen edge-on.

As nearly as I can ascertain, there is only one collected specimen of a white phase Gyrfalcon for the Northeast (in Massachusetts), and the data on that specimen's label are questioned by Griscom. There may be no others from the whole coterminal United States. White birds are essentially high Arctic, rarely moving below the Arctic Circle even in winter. Of sight records there are only three from the New York City region, the last two both in January 1939. There are three accepted by Griscom and Snyder from Massachusetts up to 1955 and two since then (1959 & 1960). There seems to be no others from elsewhere in the northeast save the Maritime Provinces.

This winter a grayish bird believed to be a Gyrfalcon was seen at Ditch Plains, Montauk, L.I., N.Y., in December 1964 by Frank Enders and Ken Berlin; a gray-to-black Gyrfalcon spent several days in late January at Point Peninsula, St. Lawrence County, south of Alexandria Bay (D. Gordon); one dark bird was seen by Ed Reilly at Chatham, Columbia County, N.Y., in late January, and two others, presumably different birds, were seen by him near Albany, N.Y., around February 20th; lastly, sometime in January or February a dark phase bird flew into a window in Pittsfield, Berkshire County,



Mass. (fide Spofford). All these certainly bespeak some sort of Gyrfalcon "invasion" in the Northeast this winter, although so far I am unaware of any coastal Massachusetts reports.

The photographs accompanying this note were taken by David G. Allen and are reproduced by courtesy of Bird Photographs, Inc.

---Paul A. Buckley  
12th Mar. 1965

A NEW DICTIONARY OF BIRDS.  
Edited by Sir A. Landsborough Thomson.  
McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964. 928 pp.,  
16 color plates, 32 black and white plates,  
numerous text figs. \$17.50.

Although a dictionary in name, this stupendous volume is encyclopedic in scope. Numerous cross-references make this notable book of the utmost value. The many collaborators are specialists in their own fields and come from all corners of the globe. Most are renowned ornithologists having broad attainments and interests in scientific matters.

Articles of great interest both to the layman and scientist cover such diverse subjects as zoogeographic regions,

ethology (behavior), classification, taxonomy, nomenclature, climatology, coloration, structure, disease, domestication, ecology, toxic chemicals (pesticides), adaptive radiation, eggs, parasites, evolution, molt, extinction, fossils, conservation, flight, genetics, imprinting (learning), migration, musculature, nests, speciation, numbers (density), plumage, ringing (banding), vocalization, anatomy, statistics, territory, mimicry, and numerous others. The treatment and discussion of the bird "groups" is made generally at the family or subfamily level.

Of great interest to students of distribution and evolution are the excellent articles on the zoogeographic regions: the Australasian by Serventy; the Oriental by Salim Ali; the Ethiopian by Moreau; the Palaearctic by Voous; and both the Nearctic and Neotropical by Mayr.

To the reviewer, one of the most fascinating articles is that on extinction by James Fisher, excellently summarized with tables.

The illustrative material varies in quality, but the many black and white photographs are superb. By and large the color paintings are attractive, those by Talbot-Kelly and Reid-Henry especially so. The illustration of the Screech Owl, however, done by another artist is barely, if at all, recognizable. A few errors inevitably crept in: on page 315 the figure labeled an Eastern Kingbird should be Scissor-tailed Flycatcher; on plate 8, the Rock Ptarmigan, figs. 3 and 4 are transposed---they should be "summer" and "winter" respectively; on plate 12 the corvid perched on a fish is appropriately enough, a Fish Crow, not a Common Crow (see Cruickshank, *Birds around New York City*, 1942, p. 319).

Landsborough Thomson is to be congratulated on organizing and editing this superlative volume, as well as contributing a number of major articles, altogether no small undertaking. The serious naturalist and birdwatcher will want to add this book to his library---a purchase well worthwhile.

---John Bull

#### ON FINDING BLACK RAIL NESTS

Turner E. McMullen used to remark that finding Black Rail nests was a cinch. "Show me a salt-marsh meadow," he would say, "and--if there's a Black Rail nest in it--I'll find it in less than 15

minutes!"

It was hardly an idle boast. McMullen was a veteran egg-collector in the DVOC and, when he made this remark in the 1930's, was reputed to have found scores of nests of this species.

His method was essentially restricted to salt hay (Spartina patens) meadows. The Black Rails, he found, preferred to nest where the older hay had been matted and flattened down. McMullen simply used a four-foot stick to flip the mat over and expose the nests underneath. All he did was to inspect each and every matted-down area on a meadow. "Most of the time, you will find nests of meadow mice (Microtus pennsylvanicus); but, if a Black Rail is around, that's where its nest is sure to be."

Nests of this species also have been reported in Salicornia, where they are likewise placed under prostrated vegetation. They should be expected in the New York City region anytime in June and July.

---Joseph J. Hickey

#### A POSTSCRIPT TO REPORT ON TOBOR BANDING PROJECT: TWO RECOVERIES

One of the purposes of our Operation Recovery banding project at Tobay, as I mentioned in my article in the February News-Letter, was the recovery of migrant birds, i.e., to obtain information from their recapture at some distant point. Last fall two of our birds, both of which had been banded by Fred Schaeffer, were "recovered."

An adult female Yellow-shafted Flicker, banded on October 3, was killed by a cat on October 15 at Farmingdale, Long Island, about nine miles north of Tobay. An immature female Yellowthroat banded on October 24 was killed by a cat on October 25 at North Massapequa, Long Island, six miles north of Tobay.

I wish to thank the two cats for their participation in our project. However, I am very confused by the Yellowthroat recovery, only six miles away, and to the north. The night of October 24 was both clear and cold, with moderate winds from the northwest. Why this bird flew such a short distance, and in the wrong direction, puzzles me. Perhaps it realized that it was disoriented and decided to halt its flight.

---Tom Davis

THE ITINERANT BIRDWATCHER  
(Birding from a Car, New York, N.Y., to Flamingo, Fla.)

by Seymour Schiff

My wife (a non-birder), daughter (insists on going with daddy, talking and scaring away the wildlife), and I traveled by car to Florida for our vacation in May 1964. Under the circumstances what birding I did was mostly in spite of my family. However, an extraordinary amount of the total vacation time was available to me during which my family neither interfered nor objected: I birded while traveling.

Birdwatching from the driver's seat (I did all the driving) of a modern automobile going 65 m.p.h. on a superhighway is a function of geography, terrain, and, especially, driver alertness. Between New York and North Carolina, bird life as seen and recognized consisted of Black and Turkey Vultures, Crows, Bluejays, Robins, Mockingbirds, Shrikes, House Sparrows, Redwings, Grackles, Cardinals, and little else identifiable under the circumstances. In addition, Cardinals, Mockingbirds, and Redwings could be heard singing as the car passed by.

The first "plus" on the trip came about three miles south of Walterboro, S.C., on Route 17A. In a yard by a ramshackle house was a scrawny cow or bull (at 55 m.p.h. I was looking at the bird, not the beast), which had a Cattle Egret at its feet. The egret was an adult in breeding plumage with brownish tan on its head and back, hence the instant recognition. This was the first of approximately 150 Cattle Egrets seen from the car on the way south to the tip of Florida, all from the main highway and almost all of the remainder in Florida.

Somewhat over a hundred miles further south (still on Route 17 but in Georgia between Eulonia and Darien) there is a forest of tall pines through which the road passes. The view is somewhat impressive as one looks down the long corridor between the trees. As I admired the view, two huge, dark, crested birds with white patches sailed across the road from right to left, high, directly in front of the car. After this, everytime there were trees on both sides of the road I watched for woodpeckers flying across. On the rest of the trip I saw Red-bellied,

Red-headed, and Red-cockaded woodpeckers and a probable Sapsucker but only one other Pileated Woodpecker.

Some five to ten miles further south at Darien, Ga., where Route 17 crosses the Altamaha River, there are extensive marshes. I had been alerted by our editor, Mr. Plunkett, to examine this area carefully. Slowing down to a modest 40 m.p.h., I peered out over the marshes to the left. Off in the distance three tern-like (but not quite) birds were flying in the same direction as the car. I pulled over to the side onto the grassy shoulder, rushed to the trunk, and frantically searched for binoculars while two of the birds disappeared. The third fortunately veered and passed directly overhead high up. Even to the naked eye its shape and solid black tail identified it as a Mississippi Kite. None of the kites were visible when the binoculars finally were extricated from the luggage, nor were they seen on the return trip north. That quick glance constituted new life-list-bird number one for the trip.

Just south of Brunswick, Ga., where Route 17 becomes a dual-lane highway, the first Boat-tailed Grackles were seen. In the marshes were shorebirds, all unidentifiable from the car except for a lone Willet which flew off as we passed.

Woodbine, Ga., had numerous Nighthawks flying over. They were first heard and then seen as I stopped for a red light. Approximately 25 miles further south in Yulee, Fla., the Nighthawks were replaced by Chuck-Will's-Widows, which were calling at dusk as we arrived. When we drove out for breakfast in the early morning, Bobwhites were calling.

From this point on in Florida most of the interesting birds seen from the car were new to me. Since we didn't stop, my wife read aloud selected pertinent passages from Peterson's guide as I requested them. As we pulled out onto the highway after breakfast, a pair of birds feeding on the ground across the road flew up and disappeared into the shrubbery. They appeared to be Bobwhite-shaped, slightly smaller, with white across the outer corners of the tail, similar to that of a Robin's tail but with more white. The

only bird that fitted the description was the Ground Dove, a bird I had never seen; however, these birds seemed too large. Not until I saw many of them in Haulover Park in Miami Beach did I realize that it was, indeed, the Ground Dove and that that species appears much larger than the six and three-fourths inches listed in Peterson.

As we returned to Route 27 from Route 634 and Highlands Hammock State Park, it was necessary to make a right turn in order to go south. As I made that turn, a large bird flew up across the intersection. By the time it was safe to take a longer look, the bird had disappeared, but not before I had a glance at the long scissor tail of the Swallow-tailed Kite. Everglades National Park later produced better views of this species.

Further south on Route 27, before the road turns east toward Lake Okeechobee, a Sandhill Crane was seen in one of the fields. The crane was sort of rusty-colored. I had never seen the bird before, and circumstances prevented my birding in the area cranes are supposed to occur in. Subsequent research disclosed: (1) Sandhill Cranes are normally gray; (2) new life-list birds are better identified through close observation than by quick glances at 65 m.p.h.; and, finally, (3) cranes are indeed reddish at times, but from rust, not from coloration. They are brownish on the back, and the shape is unmistakable.

In traveling from Motel Row in Miami Beach to Miami, we took Route 826, better known as Sunny Isle Road. The road crosses over two inlets, the borders of the shores of which are covered with Mangrove. On two occasions a white bird with black wing tips was flying in the inlet as we passed over the bridge. Consultation with Peterson's guide disclosed that I had added the White Ibis to my life list, with the second sighting a definite confirmation.

The rest of the trip south through Everglades National Park was uneventful, inasmuch as I could and did stop frequently, and all of the identifications were made while the car was at rest. However, of seventeen new birds seen on the trip, six were first identified while we were traveling, i.e., the car was in motion, and two, the Sandhill Crane and the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (told by the large white spot on the side of the head) were only seen from the moving car.

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## PROGRAMS

May 11th: Dr. Dean Amadon, "Wild Life of the Galapagos." Film and slides.

May 25th: Symposium on the Spring Migration, led by Neal Ward.

## FIELD TRIPS

Saturday, May 1st: Troy Meadows.  
Leaders: Jeff Zupan and Fred Heath.  
We will explore the area for a future nesting count, which will be conducted on June 12th. We will need cars on this trip; car owners are requested to phone the chairman and advise how many persons they can accommodate. We will leave Rikki's corner, 51st St. & Second Avenue, at 8:00 A.M.

Sunday, June 6th: Pelagic Trip. As we have chartered only two boats, it will be advisable to make your reservations early. Send check for \$7.00 for each person going on trip, payable to Harry F. McCauley, 1643 Marine Parkway, Brooklyn, N. Y. 11234. Check-in time is between 6:45 and 7:00 A.M. at the dock of the Freeport Boatmen's Association, Inc., 540 South Grove Street, Freeport, L.I., N.Y. The boats will leave promptly. Bring lunch.

Harry F. McCauley  
Field Trip Chairman  
NI 5-7280

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