



March-April

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
Ralph K. Bell

March 7, 1967 ... A chance remark this evening to my wife by her good friend, Jean Murray, led to quite a story. Jean's neighbor, Margaret Shoup, a teacher at the Beth-Center High School (about five miles north of here) had told her about a strange bird that had been shot and killed by a student near the school. I called Miss Shoup on the phone and learned that a big owl had been seen yesterday by herself and many of the students. It had first been seen sitting on one of the the light poles in the school yard. Later it flew past a large window (and aroused much interest) and landed on a large log in a field across the road from the school. After school was out, one of the students couldn't resist the temptation to kill it, so he went home, got a gun and came back.

The owl was viewed by many at the school the next day. Miss Shoup told me that one elderly man thought it must be a Snowy Owl...that he had seen one many years before. Since few Snowy Owls are recorded in Penna. in March, I was not yet too impressed (thinking it was probably a Barn Owl) but at the suggestion of Miss Shoup, I called a man she had overheard the students speak about. He had skinned the owl alright, but was very evasive as to its whereabouts. After another call, he finally gave me a number to call. The voice there wouldn't divulge much information either and gave me another number to call (everyone involved was evidently afraid of getting into trouble with the law). Finally, after five days of calling, I finally found that the owl was being mounted (at the cheapest place they could find) and the man did not have a phone.

March 12 ... After church today, my wife and I went to visit the taxidermist and found it was really a Snowy Owl - a beautiful large specimen with a 53-inch wingspread. It seemed a shame its life was snuffed out before it had a chance to fly back to the Arctic. The owl had been seen earlier that fateful day about three miles southeast of the school, sitting in a dead cherry tree near the old horserace track in the Sandy Plains area. It was a dark rainy day and the owl was probably taking what

EBBA member Dr. Charles Blake calls pre-migratory orientation flights in preparation for its long flight back to its nesting grounds. Al Engle, a student at the school, told me he had seen the owl last November in the same area, and stated he had seen one at least five times the winter before. I questioned him at length about the possibility of its being a Barn Owl, but he claimed it looked exactly like the owl killed on March 6.

While I had never seen one of these owls before, there are several records for the area. About 1935 or 1936 at least two Snowy Owls were seen about two miles southeast of here (one was later shot). While time dims memories and most occurrences are not recorded, we are fortunate in having the writings of the late J. Warren Jacobs. Mr. Jacobs had a wonderful understanding of nature and the interest in the Purple Martin in this part of the state is a direct result of his influence. He wrote many articles on the birds of Greene County between 1886 and 1938. The warmth and personality of this fine man is very evident in his account of the Snowy Owl - written in 1920 - as follows:

The Occurrence of the Snowy Owl in Southwestern Pa.
By J. Warren Jacobs.

"I do not know why it is so, but to me there always seemed something pathetic in the death of certain birds, the circumstances surrounding the death, and the sight of the lifeless body, even though it had been turned into my possession for mounting. While a sense of pride of ownership of such a bird always surrounded my thoughts, nevertheless I am thrilled to see such birds in flight, and glad to learn when they escape into the open where they add completeness and harmony to the beauty and grandure of Nature.

"An occasional eagle wanders this way, and if it be a Golden Eagle, greater still am I thrilled at his majestic flight. While they were not killed by me, nevertheless I have two of the four Golden Eagles recorded for the state of Pennsylvania during the past 25 years, both of which were killed in the southern part of Greene County, and brought to me by friends. I have the only Sandhill Crane taken in Pennsylvania, and this too from southern Greene County, near the same section from whence the eagles came.

"But of all the large birds which wander into this section, the one which moves me to the utmost tension, and the sight of whose lifeless form meets a deep pathetic chord in my heart, casting something like a sadness into my soul, even as I work over it, is the great Snowy Owl, which so suddenly swoops down upon us from the snow fields of the far north, and majestically floats about like a great white apparition in the gathering dusk of eventide.

"On November 24, 1894, a fine specimen, killed within six miles of this town (Waynesburg) was brought to me to mount, and as I worked over it my thoughts of the bird were as to why it wandered, why it was killed;

and my own lamentations that I could not make it live again and send it forth to fill its place in the glorious World of Nature. Hence the following lines, which were penned at the time and published in a local paper, together with a short article on the bird's life history:

Oh, bird from 'Land of Ling'ring Snow',
Why did you wander to and fro;
Why came you here to 'Little Greene',
Where death awaited unforeseen?
Not for your depredations, wild, -
We know your disposition, mild, -
But for your dress, so pure and white,
Is why you came to death's sad plight!
Angels, bear that form away,
Silently, at dusk of day,
To Arctic's ice-bound Polar Sea, -
In Grinnel Land, there set it free!

"I was not privileged to keep this bird, and while the angels didn't carry its form back to Grinnell Land, the bird's skin has long since gone the way many beautiful things do, a way which reverses the old maxim that 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever'.

"A few days ago, my friend Mr. Harry Kent stepped into my office with the whitest and most beautiful big Snowy Owl I ever saw, and I have looked at many mounted specimens in my time. The weight of this owl was $3\frac{1}{2}$ pounds, which showed, as well as was proved upon dissection, that the bird had been going hungry. Its measurements are as follows: length 22.5 in.; wing 15.0 in.; expanse 4 ft. 4 in. The date of capture was Dec. 9, 1918 and strange to say, the location was within two miles of the place of capture of the one in 1894.

"A neighbor of Mr. Kent's had shot at the owl when he saw it alight on the ground - presumably in the act of catching a field mouse - but missed. The bird then flew past Mr. Kent's house, and he, taking a gun and mounting a horse, followed, overtaking the bird about a mile farther on and shooting it from the tip of a hay stack pole. It flew away a distance of 200 yards, turned and retraced a part of the distance, dropping gradually to the ground and expiring."

