

First record of Mottled Owl (*Ciccaba virgata*) in the United States

*Greg W. Lasley, Chuck Sexton,
and Dan Hillsman*

ABSTRACT

A road-killed Mottled Owl (*Ciccaba virgata*) was photographed near Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park, Hidalgo County, Texas, in 1983 and the identification of the specimen was confirmed in 1986. Although much of the woodland vegetation of the lowlands of adjacent Mexico has been cleared, a resident population of Mottled Owls is known from the Sierra Picacho, approximately 90 kilometers from the Texas border, and a remnant woodland corridor still connects the Texas border with habitats in the Sierra Picacho. Based on the size of the species, the general type of traffic in the area, and patterns of adjacent land use, the accidental transport of the specimen from Mexico is considered extremely unlikely.

ON FEBRUARY 23, 1983, HILLSMAN discovered a dead owl along the side of Farm Road 2062 approximately 150 meters outside the entrance to Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park, Hidalgo County, Texas. Unsure about the owl's identification, Hillsman placed a coin (a U.S. quarter) next to the carcass for size comparison and took a color photograph of the bird. Because of the state of decomposition and the presence of ants, he examined the bird only briefly and did not save the specimen.

During January 1986, Hillsman mentioned this slide to Lasley and Sexton and remarked that he thought the bird might be a Mottled Owl (*Ciccaba virgata*). Lasley and Sexton examined the slide and could find nothing inconsistent with Mottled Owl. The slide was

then sent to Keith Arnold at the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, Texas A & M University. Arnold supported the identification as a Mottled Owl and sent the slide on to the Museum of Zoology, Louisiana State University, where it could be compared to a larger series of specimens. There the slide was examined by J. V. Remsen, Jr., Ken Rosenberg, Mark Swan, and Ted A. Parker III, who unanimously, but independently, concluded that the bird was without doubt a Mottled Owl. The original slide, the first record for the United States to our knowledge, has been deposited at VIREO at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. A duplicate slide has been deposited in the Texas Photo Record File (No. 377) at Texas A & M University. Copies

of comments from the Louisiana State University reviewers are on file with the Texas Bird Records Committee.

Diagnosis

The coin next to the owl allows us to calculate that the dishevelled carcass (which is slightly bent but not seriously contorted) is approximately 300 to 320 millimeters long. This is consistent with *C. virgata* (305 to 355 millimeters), in contrast with other possibilities such as *Glaucidium brasilianum* (165 millimeters), *Otus asio* (190 to 230 millimeters), or *Strix varia* (405 to 610 millimeters) (Burton 1973; Oberholser 1974; Hilty and Brown 1986).

The slide shows the characteristic

heavy blackish barring on the remiges and retrices of *C. virgata*. The ruffled breast feathers are clearly white with narrowly lanceolated dark median streaks on each feather (narrower than *S. varia*). No barring is visible on the (presumed) upper breast feathers (cf. *S. varia*). M. Swan (*pers. comm.* to Arnold) pointed out that the whiteness of the tarsi feathering is more characteristic of *C. virgata* than *S. varia*. T. Parker (*pers. comm.* to Arnold) stated that the narrowly streaked underparts and broad marbled tips to the flight feathers would seem to rule out any other species.

Distribution and Habitat

The Mottled Owl resides from southern Sonora, Sinaloa, Nayarit, Jalisco, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosi, southern Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas southward through Middle America (A.O.U. 1983). In addition, Mottled Owls have been recorded on numerous occasions in the Sierra Picacho Mountains, an outlying range of the Sierra Madre Oriental in northern Nuevo Leon (J. Arvin *pers. comm.*), within 90 kilometers of the Texas border (e.g. visible from Rio Grande City, Starr County, Texas).

The species occurs widely in a variety of woodland types including lowland rain forest, foothill woodland, second-growth woodland, plantations, orchards, and forest borders from sea level up to 2000 to 2500 meters (Blake 1953; Peterson and Chalif 1973; Ridgely 1981). At the aforementioned northeastern extreme of its range in Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon, the Mottled Owl inhabits tropical and subtropical gallery woodlands along streams that traverse semi-arid thorn brushlands. The Sierra Picacho population occupies woodlands and groves of oaks (*Quercus* spp.), ebonies (*Pithecellobium* spp.) and anaqua (*Ehretia anaqua*) in canyons (J. Arvin *pers. comm.*). The Texas specimen was photographed within several meters of the edge of the lowland Tamaulipan thorn woodland which dominates most of the 237-hectare Bentsen State Park. The adjacent habitat is open cropland.

A great percentage of the natural vegetation that covered the Gulf coastal plain of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon has been cleared for the grazing of beef and the production of small grain crops. However, a significant corridor of woodlands and brushlands still exists between the Texas border in southwest-

ern Hidalgo and southern Starr counties and the known populations of *Ciccaba virgata* in Nuevo Leon (J. Arvin *pers. comm.*).

Likelihood of Transport

The validity of distributional records involving roadkilled specimens is often questioned. For example, see McCaskie *et al.* (1970) concerning a record of Red-headed Woodpecker from California. Thus the hypothesis was considered that the owl might have been killed somewhere in Mexico and carried in the grill of a vehicle to the area near Bentsen State Park before dropping onto the pavement. Dead birds have undoubtedly been transported long distances in this manner. K. Rosenberg (*pers. comm.* to Arnold) described an instance in 1976 when a Carolina Chickadee carcass had apparently been carried on his automobile across the southern United States to Blythe, California. However, a bird as large as a Mottled Owl (weighing approximately 200 grams; Burton 1973) would appear an unlikely candidate to become lodged in the grill of a passenger automobile. A truck carrying workers or produce from Mexico (the most numerous and sizable Mexican vehicles in the general area of Bentsen State Park and therefore the most likely mode of conveyance) would normally originate in and/or traverse the broad treeless expanses of cropland in northern Tamaulipas adjacent to south Texas and would not normally traverse any sizable block of typical Mottled Owl woodland habitat (although some vehicles undoubtedly originate farther south and probably do pass through such habitat). Furthermore, the area near the entrance to Bentsen State Park is not one commonly travelled by commercial truck traffic transporting produce or workers from Mexico. We therefore consider the hypothesis that the bird had been transported from Mexico to be unlikely in the extreme.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the above-mentioned reviewers of the slide of the owl for their extremely useful diagnosis. We thank John Arvin, Keith Arnold, and J. V. Remsen, Jr. for comments on early drafts of this note.

LITERATURE CITED

- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1983. Check-list of North American Birds, 6th ed. Allen Press, Lawrence, Kansas.
- BLAKE, E. R. 1953. Birds of Mexico A guide for field identification. Univ of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois.
- BURTON, J. A. (ed.). 1973. Owls of the World. Clark, Irwin and Co., Toronto, Canada.
- HILTY, S. L. and W. L. BROWN. 1986. A guide to the birds of Colombia. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, New Jersey.
- McCASKIE, G., P. DEVILLERS, A. M., CRAIG, C. R. LYONS, V. E. COUGHRAN and J. T. CRAIG. 1970. A checklist of the birds of California. *California Birds* 1:4-28.
- OBERHOLSER, H. C. 1974. The bird life of Texas. University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas.
- PETERSON, R. T. and E. CHALIF. 1973. A field guide to the birds of Mexico Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Massachusetts.
- RIDGELY, R. 1981. The birds of Panama Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

—5103 Turnabout Lane, Austin, Texas 78731 (Lasley); City of Austin, Department of Environmental Protection, P. O. Box 1088, Austin, Texas 78767 (Sexton); 8507 Palace Parkway, Austin, Texas 78748 (Hillsman)

