

first record for the united states

# Stygian Owl in Texas

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Stygian Owl  
at Bentsen-Rio Grande  
Valley State Park, Texas,  
on December 26, 1996.  
First record for Texas  
and for the  
ABA Checklist Area.  
Photograph/Jim Culbertson



About 9 o'clock on the morning of December 26, 1996, we arrived at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park near Mission, Texas, hopeful of finding the current "hot line" bird, a male Blue Bunting (*Cyanocompsa parellina*). This was our fifth birding trip to south Texas, but it was the first birding trip to this area by our son, Nathan Wright, who had recently graduated from college.

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While driving around the park's outer loop, in the vicinity of the Rio Grande Hiking Trail, we spotted an adult Gray Hawk (*Asturina nitida*) perched in a low branch of a Honey Mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) near the road. We stopped and from the car watched the hawk until an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) flew in and began harassing the hawk. As the hawk flew off and landed in another nearby tree, Nathan spotted a large owl perched in the mesquite tree from which the Gray Hawk had flown. We were more interested in

studying the hawk, a life bird for Nathan, and took only a quick look at the owl. The owl, facing away from us and partially hidden behind a growth of mistletoe, was identified hastily as a Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*).

About 11:30 a.m., after returning from a walk on the Rio Grande trail, we saw that the owl was still on its perch. This time we observed it more carefully. The owl had long ear tufts somewhat like Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*), but seemed larger and bulkier. Most striking, however, was the face. It was very dark, charcoal brown to black, with a prominent white patch on the forehead. For a while we wondered about the possibility of a melanistic Long-eared Owl. We hurriedly took a few pictures by putting our camera up to our spotting scope's eyepiece, then went to the park office to report the sighting. After looking at the only Mexican field guide available there (Peterson and Chalif 1973), we realized that the bird was probably a Stygian Owl (*Asio stygius*), a species previously unknown in the United States.

Knowing the significance of this sighting, we immediately sought the help of the park staff in rounding up other birders. Assistant Superintendent Baldomero Loya helped get others to the scene quickly, so that during the afternoon hours approximately 30 others saw the owl. Among these were Pat and Jim Culbertson, Linda Northrup, Scott Rea, Steve Bentsen, Charles Duncan, Jane Kittleman, and Laura Moore. Jim Culbertson and Steve Bentsen were both able to take a number of photos of the owl, which remained cooperative by staying on the same perch all afternoon. Most helpful to all observers in confirming the identification was Howell and Webb's (1995) *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*, which was brought to the observation site. Although the plate in this particular copy showed rather washed-out colors compared to the bird we were observing, it portrayed the critical field marks of the bird, particularly the patterns of color on the face and the shape and placement of the ear tufts.

We note here that this owl, although very easy to observe once it was detected, was not easy to detect. It was perched between a large vertical branch and a clump of mistletoe. Against the background of dark-colored tree bark the owl was not easily seen. Even though the owl was large and no more than 25 yards away, most observers saw the bird only after it was pointed out to them. We suspect that had it not been for the harassing behavior of the hawks, the owl never would have been seen by anyone.

It was fortunate that this little-known owl should make its first known visit to the United States at one of the most heavily birded spots in the country. Also fortunate was the fact that none of the observers attempted to approach the owl too closely. It remained, apparently undisturbed, all day. Unfortunately for all involved, the owl flew away from its roost at dusk, and despite diligent searching by many hopeful birders over the next few days, it was not relocated.

## DESCRIPTION

**Size and Shape.** The owl was moderately large, somewhat like a Long-eared Owl, but to us and other observers it appeared longer and noticeably stockier. This stockier build was apparent regardless of the posture or extent to which the feathers were fluffed. The ear tufts were long and closely set, like those of Long-eared Owl, but with a very pronounced inward curve. The wings were very long, with primary tips on the folded wing extending slightly beyond the tail.

**Head.** The most striking feature of the bird was the very dark face. Depending on light conditions, the color of the facial disk varied from charcoal black to charcoal brown. The ear tufts were the

same dark color except for an almost imperceptible whitish fringe along the inner edge. The forehead was marked by a large white patch, speckled with charcoal, which was broad and rounded above the eyes and bill and narrowed upward to a point between the ear tufts. From this point two narrow white streaks continued back across the top of the crown. Around the outer edges of the facial disks were flecks of white which became more prominent and formed a noticeable but narrow border around the lower portion of the facial disks.

**Upperparts.** The back of the head, folded wings and mantle were a dark chocolate brown, a distinctly lighter shade than the facial disks and ear tufts. The mantle was sparingly flecked with white. Tail and primaries were barred with white.

**Underparts.** The upper chest was mottled with chocolate brown and white, the brown being more prominent. Little pattern was evident in this area. The lower chest and belly region was much more distinctively patterned with chocolate pluses or crosses on a background of white. This pattern was very similar to the pattern found on Long-eared Owl.

**Bare Parts.** The bill appeared dark gray or black, depending on the light. The eyes showed dark yellow irides and black pupils. The skin of the lower legs and feet, seen during episodes of preening, was gray and unfeathered except for fine wisps of down.

**Additional Comments.** The owl did not vocalize during the day, and was seen in flight only briefly at dusk, as it flew strongly and swiftly from the roost northwest toward the interior of the park. The bird was not banded. The plumage appeared to be in excellent condition. In addition to the excellent photographs taken by Jim Culbertson and Steve Bentsen, the bird was studied for several hours through spotting scopes at a range of about 25 yards.

After consideration of all the documentation, on November 24, 1997, the Texas Bird Records Committee of the Texas Ornithological Society accepted this record as the first occurrence of Stygian Owl in the state.

## DISCUSSION

**Distribution and Abundance.** The historical range of Stygian Owl is very large, stretching from northwest Mexico through Central America, and into South America as far south as Argentina. Away from the mainland, Stygian Owl occurs in the Greater Antilles (Cuba and Hispaniola). The range is highly disjunct, consisting of several apparently separate populations. These disjunct populations have been the basis for the description of several weakly defined races (Hume 1991).

In Mexico, Stygian Owl is more frequently found in mountains of the northwest. This population occurs in the Sierra Madre Occidental of southwestern Chihuahua, the border region of Sinaloa and Durango, and Jalisco. A more localized southern population occurs in the Sierra Madre del Sur of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas. In the east, Stygian Owl has been found in the Sierra Madre Oriental of central Veracruz (Howell and Webb 1995). John Arvin (pers. comm.) suggests that the distribution of Stygian Owl could be continuous between the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental, along the transverse range of volcanic mountains which extend from Jalisco to Veracruz, south of Mexico City. There is no firm evidence that Stygian Owl occurs in the northern portion of the eastern mountains, the Sierra Madre Oriental.

Several authors (Hume, Howell and Webb, Voous 1988) comment on the lack of information upon which to base claims of distribution or abundance. Although it may be fairly common in some areas, Stygian Owl would have to be considered rare in terms of

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recorded observations. Commenting on the scarcity of sightings and the general lack of information on this species, John Arvin (pers. comm.) wrote: "There aren't any Stygian Owl experts. Those of us in the birding tour business have more field experience with them than anyone else, but that isn't saying much."

**Habitat.** Stygian Owl is usually considered to be a bird of montane forests. However, it seems to be quite adaptable, and in various parts of its wide range it has been found in habitats ranging from fully developed tropical rain-forest to low arid thorn bush (Hume 1991). Although its typical nesting habitat is trees (using abandoned nests of other birds), it has been found nesting on the ground in Cuba (Hume).

In mainland Mexico, the typical habitat is montane forests of pine, oak, and fir (Howell and Webb, Arvin). This habitat occurs throughout the Sierra Madre Occidental (west), the Sierra Madre Oriental (east), and the transverse range which connects these two mountain ranges. The dry woods along the Rio Grande might seem to be totally inappropriate for a stray from montane forests. However, the woods of Bentsen State Park are actually quite similar in general appearance to habitats occupied by this species in the Chaco region of Paraguay and Argentina (Arvin, pers. comm.) and on the island of Hispaniola (Rick Bowers, pers. comm.).

**Dispersal.** Clearly, the important questions raised by the sighting of Stygian Owl in south Texas are how and from where? Neither of these can be answered definitively, but it is important to consider the possibilities. The first question to be considered is how the owl reached south Texas. Did it fly in under its own power from a nearby portion of its range, or was it an escape from captivity? There was certainly nothing about this bird's appearance or behavior which would indicate captivity. It was seen to fly normally, it was not banded, nor did it show any missing feathers or unusual feather wear. Quite the contrary, several observers remarked that the bird's plumage was immaculate. Greg Lasley (pers. comm.) comments that although many kinds of birds in Mexico are kept in captivity, owls in general are not kept as caged birds. Andres Sada (pers. comm.), a prominent Mexican birder, commented that in Mexico owls are kept as caged birds only in zoos or similar collections. He knew of no captive Stygian Owls. Steve N. G. Howell (pers. comm.) agreed that in his research throughout Mexico he had seen no Stygian Owls in captivity.

Assuming that the bird in question did indeed fly into south Texas on its own, the important question becomes *from where?* It may be worthwhile to recall that Stygian Owl is a close relative of Long-eared Owl, and although it is not known as a seasonal migrant like the Long-eared, it may share some of the Long-eared's abilities to disperse over long distances.

Rick Bowers (pers. comm.) has pointed out that "some individuals show extreme site fidelity. My wife Nora found a Stygian Owl roost in the pine-oak woodlands on the Volcan de Colima in Jalisco,

Mexico, in 1986. A Stygian Owl (or two) has occupied this same tree on most days that I have visited in each of the eleven years since that time." However, he also reports that the species is a powerful flier,

and should be capable of traveling long distances. John Arvin comments that Stygian Owl is a good disperser, and cites the presence of these birds on islands (such as Cozumel and the Greater Antilles) as evidence of dispersal ability. In addition, Stygian Owl, like Long-eared, occupies a very large range but is seldom seen. Consequently, it is probably more numerous than would be indicated by the few sightings. Given the wide range of habitats that this owl can occupy, and the low probability of observing Stygian Owls when they are present, the species may be resident in areas of Mexico beyond its known range.

In our opinion, a likely source for the Texas Stygian Owl would be the northern portion of the Sierra Madre Oriental mountains. This area contains the montane forest

habitat usually favored by the Stygian Owl in Mexico. Portions of this area are no more than about 240 km (150 mi.) from Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park. Although there are no confirmed sightings of Stygian Owl from this area, there is one interesting verbal report of a "big black owl" seen in southwestern Tamaulipas by Frank Harrison, founder of the Rancho del Cielo biological station (Arvin, pers. comm.). Even if this area does not contain a permanent resident population, it would appear that any Stygian Owl moving north from the more southern portion of its range would naturally follow the montane oak-pine corridor provided by the Sierra Madre Oriental. This montane habitat corridor would guide the owls north from Veracruz into Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon and Coahuila. From these latter three states, infrequent dispersal to the forested lower Rio Grande valley of Texas might be expected.

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