

A Pre-1996 North American Record of Stygian Owl

MEL COOKSEY

Editor's note: In a previous issue of *Field Notes* we published a note by John and Paula Wright, with photographs by Jim Culbertson, describing the first Stygian Owl to be identified north of the Mexican border: at Bentsen–Rio Grande Valley State Park, Texas, on December 26, 1996 (Wright and Wright 1997). After that article was written, however, an amazing revelation came from Mel and Arlie Cooksey, well-known birding experts from Corpus Christi, Texas. The Cookseys, as detailed below, had unknowingly documented an earlier North American record of the species.

It is important to note that at the time they saw and photographed this bird, in December 1994, there were no good illustrations of Stygian Owl readily available to observers in the United States. Furthermore, there had never been a record of this species anywhere in northeastern Mexico, so no one would have expected it to appear in Texas. The Cookseys deserve credit for having had the presence of mind to photograph the bird and to identify it later. Quite a few other birders saw that same owl, and never put the correct name on it even after the fact.

Mel Cooksey's "confession" about his delayed identification was originally posted on the "TexBirds" online discussion. Mel's account was written with wit and class, and we thank him for the opportunity to reprint this note, with minor editing. See also the comments by Greg Lasley, Chuck Sexton, et al., in the Texas Region report in this issue of *Field Notes*.

Birders, did you ever dream of discovering a new North American record? Did you ever feel that you might have found an extreme rarity but were not certain of the identity? How about those of you who have studied a bird closely, photographed it, taken detailed field notes during the observation, and still blew it?! I'm about to describe a world-class humility lesson that I recently received. A diligent exercise in retrospective.



Two views of a Stygian Owl (*Asio stygius*) at Bentsen–Rio Grande Valley State Park, Texas. The species was first identified at Bentsen (first record for the United States) in 1996, but these photos were taken two years earlier, on December 9, 1994. At that time, no available reference had a good illustration of Stygian Owl, and the species was not known to occur anywhere near Texas; birders naturally identified the bird as a Long-eared Owl. Photographs/Arlie Cooksey

To set the scene, my wife Arlie and I were birding around Bentsen–Rio Grande Valley State Park, Hidalgo County, Texas, on December 9, 1994. Late in the day, we spotted an owl not far from the road which we both immediately identified as Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*). After we had looked at the bird through the scope, taken some notes, and Arlie had shot two quick photos, other birders came along and shared views of the owl. Everybody was delighted to see a Long-eared Owl at Bentsen, this one likely an immature, as judged by its undeveloped facial pattern. Some of the observers had seen the December 1989 Long-eared Owl very near this spot (which we also saw and photographed), and some may have been involved with another record, also from Bentsen.

That's the end of that portion of the story. One owl, fairly well seen (given the dim light of the late afternoon, about 5:30 p.m.) by several capable observers, including some well-knowns. Just another day at the office.

Cut to a rainy March 15, 1998 and to my

littered desk, where I am going through some old photos. There's the Bentsen 1994 Long-eared Owl photo.

I freeze in my tracks.

The areas where I used to have hair stand up on my head. My entire life flashes in front of me. This bird's likeness haunts me like some diabolical celluloid Medusa.

It has blackish facial disks . . . It has a white spot in the middle of its forehead . . .

It is—as many a Texas birder would realize now, following the highly publicized December 1996 "first record" of the species—a Stygian Owl (*Asio stygius*). But this one was photographed two years before the "first North American record."

This, of course, is an exercise in hindsight. The first question was, "How did we misidentify this bird?" Well, I will take the credit for that one. (I now recall how Arlie had asked something like "Why does it have that face color?" or stated that "Something doesn't look right." How absurd to be caught up in so much trivial detail!) Actually, I wouldn't have had the foggiest idea what a Stygian Owl was in 1994. It was not

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until December 26, 1996, that most Texas birders were enlightened by the one-day Bentsen sighting (Wright and Wright 1997). My only experience regarding the species was a very unfortunate drawing in *Owls of the World* by John Burton (1973), which looks absolutely nothing like this bird. The Stygian Owl plate in Peterson's Mexican guide (Peterson and Chalif 1973) doesn't help much either. The date of our sighting was a few months prior to the publication of the excellent Mexican bird guide by Howell and Webb (1995), so I don't really feel so bad about the incorrect identification. Actually, we were surrounded by people who had much more tropical experience than we did, and they didn't have a clue either.

What I now believe, even more than ever, is that the birder needs to prepare for anything in South Texas, in as many ways as possible. In my case, that includes re-viewing old photos. It is becoming a little easier, with all the tapes and books that are now available, to learn about what Mexican strays should look and sound like. The need to anticipate is a credo in birding. I hope I can practice what I preach. If we theorize a bit further, if Stygian Owl can occur, what about Vermiculated Screech-Owl (*Otus guatemalae*) or a live record of Mottled Owl (*Ciccaba virgata*)? A very good birder told me recently about a Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) sighting at Bentsen, and I was with a very good birder who called a Barred Owl at Salineño in 1993. However, the latest checklist of birds of the lower Rio Grande Valley (by Brad McKinney) shows Barred Owl as only an accidental visitor there. Guess what other owl is almost exactly that size?

In summary, our experience with this Stygian Owl taught me three important lessons:

1. If a bird looks funny, it probably is.
2. Old photos should never be looked at on rainy days.
3. If your wife asks you what's "wrong" with a bird, you had better, by God, find something wrong with it.

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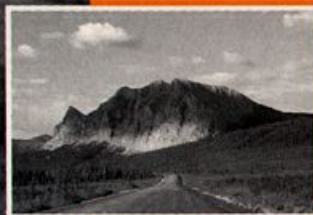


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