

SOME UNUSUAL WATER BIRD VISITORS TO TENNESSEE

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Although Tennessee has at one time or another during the year about 275 species of birds, her quota of water birds is comparatively small. This is due to the fact that, save for Reelfoot Lake, there are no large lakes and that being far from the sea coast, few coastal birds visit us even during the migration season. It is therefore of more than passing interest when such birds pay us a visit and in some cases is worthy of permanent record, such as the following notes on eleven of the rarer species.

During the last week in January, 1925, the Tennessee River north of Chattanooga had a most unusual and interesting visitation of Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), some features of which cannot be fully explained. The cause of this visitation was the presence of a vast number of dead fish killed when a break in a dam at Saltville, above Knoxville, released quantities of alkali into the river. Within a few days Herring Gulls began to appear, and as though they had signaled their fellows by wireless, they were quickly followed by others and others until finally hundreds were to be seen meandering down the river in the wake of the floating fish. Mr. H. P. Ijams, of Knoxville, whose home overlooks the river, and who is a close observer, tells me that he does not recall having seen these gulls at all in previous years. I have seen them, however, on several occasions in early spring on this river at Chattanooga, in singles, twos or threes.

The White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) breeds in the far northwest and migrates southward through the Rockies and the Great Plains to its winter home on the Gulf. Tennessee is not in the path of its travel and the three records we have are outstanding in interest. Our first is that of a specimen killed on Reelfoot Lake in 1918 and mounted by Mr. Seth Curlin, of Hickman, Kentucky, who placed it in the Hickman Hotel, where he showed it to me a few months later. On October 3, 1926, two White Pelicans were shot at Reelfoot Lake, and one of these has been mounted for the new State Museum of Wild Life at Nashville. These two birds had been on the lake for about a month. The third and last record is based on a news dispatch from Tullahoma, Tennessee, which states that on September 24, 1926, a farmer found one in his barn lot and brought it to that town. This big bird had probably mistaken the grey galvanized iron barn roof for a pond of water and flew into it. The hurricane which wrecked Miami occurred just six days previous to the visit of this Pelican. In this connection, I am reliably informed that at about the same time,

a White Pelican was captured near Atlanta, Georgia. One old record is also available, that of S. N. Rhoads, who, writing in 1895, stated that one he saw mounted in a hotel at Union City, was shot at Reelfoot Lake. Howell, in his "Birds of Arkansas," mentions three records from the interior of that state.

The Whistling Swan (*Olor columbianus*) was, in pioneer days, a regular migrant in Tennessee and was so abundant on Reelfoot Lake at times that they were killed and shipped in carload lots to Nashville, Memphis, and Louisville. With the settling up of their breeding grounds in the Northwest, this splendid game bird gradually decreased, until it is now very rarely seen in the interior of the country. We have four recent records for the State, as follows: I observed several flocks on the Mississippi River above Tiptonville in January, 1911. On November 9, 1926, one was seen on Reelfoot Lake and was shot by a native who was later prosecuted. It was procured for the State Museum by the local warden, who states that this is the only swan he has seen during his fifteen years on the lake. In Middle Tennessee, near Manchester in Coffee County, a flock of twelve settled themselves on a small lake on December 18, 1919. They spent several days unmolested, I am told, until some automobile tourists found them and shot four of the flock, causing the rest to leave. One of the dead birds was sent to Nashville where I identified it. I regret to record that the guilty parties were not apprehended. The last record we have of this species is that of two which were shot near Knoxville on December 8, 1926, on the Little Tennessee River south of that city. Vigorous action was brought against the culprits, and the case is still pending.

The smaller forms of geese have been quite rare in the Mississippi Valley for many years although a considerable number winter on the Louisiana coast and must pass over in migration. I am giving below the only records we have of the Blue Goose (*Chen caerulescens*) and for the Snow Goose (*Chen h. hyperborea*).

Two of the latter species were wounded and captured on Reelfoot Lake in the fall of 1927 and were kept by a local game warden until they could recover. One died later but the other survived and was sent to Nashville, to the Glendale Zoo, where I saw and identified it on February 20, 1928. With it was a Blue Goose which had also been taken in the same manner and about the same time at Reelfoot. On March 3, 1928, both species were recorded on the Mississippi River thirty miles north of Memphis, my informant being Dr. Louis Leroy of that city, who was accompanied by Dr. Jno. C. Phillips of

Massachusetts, and others. Half a dozen flocks of the Blue Geese were noted, their total number being 102. Mixed with them were probably a dozen Snow Geese. One large flock comprising fifty-one birds was approached to within one hundred yards. Dr. Leroy writes further, "During the last twenty years I have been on the Mississippi River in this district a good deal and believe that I have seen not more than a half dozen Snow Geese and perhaps a similar number of Blue Geese as individuals, traveling with flocks of Canada Geese. About November 2, 1927, I killed a Snow Goose at long range out of a flock of about twenty of these birds. It was the first one of this species I had killed and was quite an object of curiosity among many old hunters here who had never seen one before. I know of two more which have been killed this year in this vicinity. Altogether, I have seen about a hundred Blue Geese this year in addition to the 102 which we counted on March 3. I am inclined to believe that last year's flood caused a change in their food conditions and this led them to spread over this territory this year."

Tennessee is visited by about twenty species of the duck family, some of which are common and others but rarely recorded. One of the rarest is the White-winged Scoter (*Oidemia deglandi*), a duck which usually migrates from its Canadian breeding grounds down the two coasts, remaining in sea water through the winter. I am able to record a flock of these on the thirty-five acre Radnor Lake in the hills near Nashville, where from November 10-18, 1917, a flock of six remained and were closely observed by myself and other students of wild life.

The American Egret (*Herodias egretta*), while still a rarity, is apparently showing a steady increase in the South, judging by its occurrence in Tennessee. Each year, in late summer, along the rivers the egrets are recorded in flocks of two to six, for at that season they roam northward from their breeding grounds, which are chiefly in the southern coastal swamps. We are now recording them several times each July and August near Nashville. The most satisfactory evidence of their comeback was furnished on Reelfoot Lake during July, 1926, when flocks of hundreds visited that fine body of water. It is in order here to say that most of the white herons seen in summer on our rivers are the immature of the Little Blue Heron, the young of which are white during their first summer, and "egret" records made by inexperienced observers usually refer to this species.

The Wood Ibis (*Mycteria americana*), locally called "Gourd Head," breeds in rookeries along the gulf coastal swamps and when

nesting season is over, moves northward up the Mississippi Valley, as far sometimes as Cairo. While it is regularly seen along the Mississippi River near Memphis and on Reelfoot Lake, we have but one record for further east in the state, that of an individual seen on Radnor Lake near Nashville, July 25, and on August 1, 1925, by Harry C. Monk. A prolonged drouth had preceded this date, drying up the customary feeding places of this species in Alabama and Mississippi and it had evidently moved northward in search of water. During the five weeks following, Wood Ibises were reported north of Nashville, in Kentucky, (Madisonville) and finally in central Illinois, far beyond their usual range. Reference to this species is particularly timely this year, for as though nature had made especial provision for such emergencies, thousands of them will shortly move up into the flooded Mississippi Valley and, following the receding waters, will consume vast quantities of dead fish, left behind in the drying sloughs and fields. I have many times, in Mississippi and Louisiana, watched these splendid and timely scavengers, gorging themselves on these dead and dying fish, and wondered how they marshalled their forces so quickly and in such numbers.

On September 22, 1926, I was standing on the muddy banks of the Tennessee River at Johnsonville, watching the mussel fisherman reap their harvest of shells, when three large birds leisurely winged their way by and furnished me the first and only record we have of the beautiful Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*). These large terns make their summer home from the Great Lakes into Western Canada, and passing south apparently, from the dearth of records, make but few stops. Observed at a distance of a hundred feet the large birds, with their black caps and red bills pointed downward toward the water, were readily identified. Another member of the tern family, however, has furnished us a more remarkable record and one that may never be duplicated for Tennessee. I refer to the Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*), a species which inhabits the islands of the West Indies and is rarely seen north of Maimi, Florida. During the last week in July, 1926, a hurricane moved northward out of the Indies and spent itself on the Carolina coast. On July 30 an exhausted Sooty Tern was picked up at an altitude of 3,300 feet in the Great Smoky Mountains, thirty miles southwest of Knoxville, Tennessee. This bird, apparently unable to breast the gale or perhaps having lost its sense of direction, had actually crossed a mountain range 6,000 feet above sea level and

had strayed nearly a thousand miles from its usual home. Miss Elizabeth Ijams who made the find, sketched and wrote down an accurate description of the bird and furnished it to her father, H. P. Ijams, a competent ornithologist of Knoxville, who in turn furnished it to me. Additional records of this species were made during the week which followed, from Charleston, South Carolina, Raleigh, North Carolina, and as far north as Wheeling, West Virginia.

More than thirty years ago a Philadelphia ornithologist, S. N. Rhoads, visited the vicinity of Reelfoot Lake in West Tennessee and in publishing a list of the birds, he included the name of the Black Skimmer (*Rynchops nigra*), whose usual habitat is along the Gulf and south Atlantic Sea coasts. His notation was as follows: "A specimen was found dead in Obion County, after a severe storm, by Mr. J. A. Craig, who gave me an account of it." Our local bird students regarded the evidence as unfortunately scant and, knowing that this species never voluntarily leaves the sea coast, we were inclined to cast it out as a state record. Some ten years ago, while at Hickman, Kentucky, near Reelfoot Lake, I was invited by an elderly gentleman there (Mr. Seth Curlin) to look over his old collection of bird skins, which invitation I accepted with pleasure. One may imagine my surprise and delight when, on unrolling the yellowed tissue paper from one of the specimens, I looked upon the skin of a Black Skimmer, labeled "Obion County, Tennessee, near Pierce, November, 1890;" this is no doubt the one referred to by Mr. Rhoads in his list, and clinches this species as a valid addition to our State list. I now have this specimen in my collection.

It will be noted that little reference is made to records of water birds on the Mississippi River, although it forms the west boundary of the state. It is for the reason that the writer has been able to spend but little time there in migration seasons nor has he had the co-operation of anyone living in that vicinity. The great river, however, with its succession of sandbars and "old river" lakes, is well known to be a popular thoroughfare for migrating water birds and would doubtless yield many surprising records over a period of years.

NASHVILLE, TENN.