

THOSE SOUNDLY SLEEPING SCREECH OWLS

Thomas Z. Atkeson and Harold Johnson

Black-whiskered Vireo - Fort Morgan banded April 15 (TAI); Dauphin banded April 24 (REH),  
 1 seen May 14 (REH,DB); now 9 State records.  
 Philadelphia Vireo - Dog R, Mobile, April 1 (LMCK) earliest State.  
 Black-and-white Warbler - Dauphin March 12 (LRT,AGT).  
 Prothonotary Warbler - Dauphin March 12 (LRT,AGT).  
 Worm-eating Warbler - Dauphin March 17 (LRT) earliest State.  
 Blue-winged Warbler - Dauphin March 22 (M&JM) earliest State.  
 Nashville Warbler - Dauphin April 8 (LRT) ties earliest Gulf Coast.  
 Tennessee Warbler - Fort Morgan May 14 (TAI,JVP) latest Gulf Coast.  
 Parula Warbler - Dauphin March 5 (GC,REH).  
 Yellow Warbler - Fort Morgan May 14 (TAI,JVP) ties latest State south of breeding range.  
 Cape May Warbler - Dauphin May 21 (LRT) latest State  
 Myrtle Warbler - Huntsville, a male May 26 (BGM),female June 9 (BGM,MLB,PS) latest State.  
 Black-throated Blue Warbler - Dauphin April 8 (fide MAG) ties earliest State,1 Apr.24(LRT).  
 Black-throated Green Warbler - Dauphin March 18 (REH) earliest Gulf Coast.  
 Blackpoll Warbler - Eufaula April 16 (MF) earliest LCP.  
 Louisiana Waterthrush - Dauphin March 3 (S&REH) earliest State; Lovick, Jefferson Co.,  
 March 11 (DJH) earliest Mountain Region.  
 Connecticut Warbler - Dauphin male banded May 4 (MEM) 2nd GC, 9th State spring records.  
 Mourning Warbler - Jacksonville May 7 (WJC) earliest Mountain Region.  
 Hooded Warbler - Abundant, see BANDING; Dauphin March 3 (S&REH) earliest State, April 5  
 "saw more than in my whole life" (OSP).  
 Bobolink - Dauphin April 14 (G&JM) earliest Gulf Coast.  
 Yellow-headed Blackbird - Fort Morgan April 30 (JVP,TW) latest of 2 State spring records.  
 Boat-tailed Grackle - Dothan 2 March 29 (MF).  
 Rose-breasted Grosbeak - Immature male at Fairhope from previous period to March 11(A&MN).  
 Black-headed Grosbeak - Fairhope female March 16 (JDW); Dauphin last seen April 12 (REH);  
 Fairhope last seen May 3 (A&MN) latest State except UCP.  
 Blue Grosbeak - Pollard, Escambia Co.,3 March 31 (CLK,mob) earliest LCP.  
 Indigo Bunting - Dauphin May 31 (REH,SBH) latest GC.  
 Evening Grosbeak - Fairhope female May 10 (A&MN) latest GC; Birmingham female May 15.  
 at Mulga (L&MW) latest Mtn. Region except female June 6 Birmingham (RW).  
 Pine Siskin - Birmingham 5 May 12 (HBT,IFS) ties latest for Mtn. Region.  
 Red Crossbill - Bankhead Forest 5 March 1 (TAI,HHK), 6 possible family group May 5 (TAI).  
 Savannah Sparrow - 2 Fort Morgan May 14 (TAI,JVP) latest Gulf Coast.  
 Grasshopper Sparrow - Eufaula 1 March 18 (MF) latest LCP.  
 Lark Sparrow - Dauphin April 14 (LRT,AGT) earliest Gulf Coast.  
 Whitethroated Sparrow - Fairhope May 22 (A&MN) latest GC except a summer record.  
 Swamp Sparrow - Bussey's Lake, Russell Co.,May 10 (JM) latest UCP.

Observers: Alabama Ornithological Society, Thomas Z. Atkeson, Raymond D. Bates, Kate Beck,  
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We had given little thought to the sleeping habits of Screech Owls (*Otus asio*);  
 in fact, we had seldom thought of them at all except when we heard them a-screeching,  
 until a Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*) nest box program was begun on the Wheeler National  
 Wildlife Refuge some years ago. Normally, these boxes are checked twice yearly, once  
 in mid or late winter to insure that they are in good condition, properly located,  
 etc., and again in late summer or early fall to determine the degree of use. Late  
 summer checks indicate the little owls make some warm-weather use of the boxes, for  
 unhatched Screech Owl eggs, feathers, rodent and fish bones, and other owl sign are  
 found. It is the late winter check, though, that reveals the owls themselves, most  
 of them sleeping like Rip Van Winkle. For example, a check of eighty-two boxes during  
 the last week of January and first week of February, 1973, showed ten Screech Owls,  
 seven red phase and three gray phase, inside the boxes in various states of somnolence.

Shortly after the system of mid or late winter box checks began some years ago,  
 we began finding owls in the boxes so soundly asleep that they appeared dead, and it  
 proved all but impossible to wake them. Invariably, these would be in a semi-standing  
 position leaning in a corner of the box, eyes closed. You could play catch with the  
 little rascals without rousing them. For example, Harold Johnson, a comparative new-  
 comer, received his first experience with a winter box check in February 1971. Sure  
 enough, there was a little red screechie in one of the first boxes he climbed to,  
 sleeping soundly. Harold thought it would take first place in a cutie contest and  
 was determined to show it to his wife, so he placed the sleeping beauty in his lunch  
 box, hauled it around the remainder of the day and then home with him at the end of  
 work-time. When he opened the lunch box, he found the little fellow hadn't turned a  
 feather and was still snoozing peacefully. After he and Mrs. Johnson examined it at  
 some length, they decided to wake it and release it. This proved easier said than  
 done. There was much shaking, etc., before the owl roused enough to fly away.

After a number of similar examples of this sleepiness, we began to wonder if this  
 was normal owl behavior or, perhaps, the torpidity that we had read about which affects  
 southwestern Poorwill's and Andean Hummingbirds. We wrote Dr. Oliver Austin, editor  
 of the AUK and curator of the Florida State Museum, about this and he suggested a  
 check on temperature, respiration and heartbeat. By the time this correspondence  
 had flowed back and forth, it was late February 1972 and weather was warm. We were  
 determined to follow his instructions but to wait for the colder weather of 1973.

At 2 pm on January 9, after a nighttime low of twenty-four degrees and the  
 thermometer then reading twenty-eight degrees, we decided to check an owl thoroughly.  
 Sure enough, there was one in the first box examined that was thoroughly unconscious.  
 Using a rectal thermometer borrowed from a local veterinarian, we recorded the body  
 temperature as 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit. The respiration rate was 7.5 breaths per  
 minute, though no heartbeat could be detected. We hauled the owlet to a Decatur  
 veterinarian ten miles away.

"That thing can't be alive," the vet said as we laid it on his table. He  
 attempted to find a heartbeat for us, but couldn't. We took our lethargic friend to  
 the Wheeler Refuge office and left it there overnight with the thermostat set at  
 about seventy-five degrees. When we returned at seven-thirty the next morning, we  
 found him sitting there as bright-eyed and as bushy-tailed as any stumpy-tailed  
 Screech Owl could be. We grabbed the little fellow and again took his body tempera-  
 ture to find that it had risen to 103.4 degrees, and a re-check on his respiration  
 rate in this alert stage showed that this,also,had risen to sixty-six breaths per  
 minute. With the outside temperature twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit, we placed him  
 outside in a box to see if he would go back to sleep, but he didn't. Determined to  
 get a heartbeat reading, we carried him to a second Decatur veterinarian who was able  
 to establish this as 120 beats per minute. Feeling that this one had suffered enough  
 indignities to last any Screech Owl several lifetimes, we took him back to the  
 vicinity of his bed box and released him.

## SPECIES LIST FOR STATE MEETING AT GULF SHORES, ALABAMA

April 13,14,15, 1973

Feeling it best to repeat these recordings, Harold, along with Richard Bays, set about finding a second owl on January 11 at 9:30 am with the temperature standing at twenty-six degrees. They promptly found one, but he proved a bit less torpid than the first. He also showed a body temperature of 100.4 degrees, but a respiration rate of twenty breaths per minute and a heart rate of only forty-eight beats per minute. Checking further, they promptly found a second owl and checked it at a body temperature of 101.0 degrees, a respiration rate of twenty-four breaths per minute, and a heart rate of sixty beats per minute.

Thoroughly confused, we duly recorded all this data and mailed it to Dr. Austin. His reply indicated that the owls must be exhibiting a merely sound daytime sleep, since, had this been true torpidity, the body temperature should have approximated the outside temperature. So much for the hope that we had discovered another example of bird hibernation, but we enjoyed our experience whole-heartedly with those soundly sleeping Screech Owls and feel that we learned a bit.

Harold now has his own explanation. During the course of the most recent nest box check, a semi-sleeping owl was fished from a box, shaken awake, and released. It promptly flew directly into the hole of a nearby box, struck the backboard with a resounding thump and dropped, sleeping, to the bottom. "Maybe," Harold says, "our sleeping owls are merely those that have knocked themselves 'coo-coo' by flying into nest boxes without first letting their flaps down."

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, P. O. Box 1643, Decatur 35601

One hundred eighty-one (181) species of birds were seen at the AOS Spring Meeting at Gulf Shores April 13,14,15, 1973 (area in Baldwin County South of County Road 12). Considering the early date and beautiful weather, we were generally pleased with the variety, if not abundance, of bird life. Many people were happy with the number of Least Bitterns and both species of Gallinules that were seen. All are invited back any time to beautiful Baldwin County. A complete species list follows with notations by those of special interest.

Common Loon, Horned Grebe, Pied-billed Grebe, Brown Pelican, Gannet, Double-crested Cormorant, Magnificent Frigatebird, Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, Little Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Louisiana Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron (1 adult, Louise McKinstrey), Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Least Bittern, American Bittern, Glossy Ibis, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Greater Scaup, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Black Vulture, Swallow-tailed Kite (1, Harriett Wright), Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Osprey (3), Merlin (1, Fairly Chandler, Mini Nonkas), American Kestrel, Bobwhite, King Rail, Clapper Rail, Virginia Rail, Sora, Purple Gallinule, Common Gallinule, American Coot.

American Oystercatcher (1, has become regular at Alabama Point), Semipalmated Plover, Piping Plover, Snowy Plover (2), Killdeer, American Golden Plover, Black-bellied Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Common Snipe, Whimbrel, Upland Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, Willet, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitcher, Stilt Sandpiper (7-11), Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Marbled Godwit, Sanderling, American Avocet (2, showed a sharp increase in the area; 50 seen a few days earlier by Chandler and Peter Quinn), Black-necked Stilt (6, showed a sharp increase in the area), Herring Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Laughing Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, Forster's Tern, Least Tern, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, Caspian Tern.

Rock Dove, White-winged Dove (3, at Fort Morgan), Mourning Dove, Ground Dove, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Screech Owl, Great Horned Owl, Chuck-will's-widow, Common Nighthawk, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Belted Kingfisher, Yellow-shafted Flicker, Pileated Woodpecker, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Kingbird, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Wood Pewee, Tree Swallow, Bank Swallow, Rough-winged Swallow, Barn Swallow, Purple Martin, Blue Jay, Fish Crow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown-headed Nuthatch, House Wren (1, Henry Stevenson), Carolina Wren, Long-billed Marsh Wren, Short-billed Marsh Wren, Mockingbird, Catbird, Brown Thrasher, American Robin.

Wood Thrush, Hermit Thrush, Swainson's Thrush, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Loggerhead Shrike, Starling, White-eyed Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo, Black-whiskered Vireo (1, banded by Tom Imhof and photographed), Red-eyed Vireo, Black-and-White Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Swainson's Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Northern Parula Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Cape May Warbler, Myrtle Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Pine Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Palm Warbler, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Louisiana Waterthrush, Kentucky Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Hooded Warbler, American Redstart, House Sparrow, Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, Red-winged Blackbird, Orchard Oriole, Boat-tailed Grackle, Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, Scarlet Tanager, Summer Tanager.

Cardinal, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Painted Bunting, Evening Grosbeak (1, at feeder on Boggy Branch; seen again April 16 by Chandler and Emmie Lou Grimley), American Goldfinch, Rufous-sided Towhee, Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Seaside Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Field Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Song Sparrow.

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