

## OWL WINTER

Robert R. Reid, Jr.

For those interested in the occurrence of rare birds in Alabama, the past winter of 1974-75 might appropriately be called "Owl Winter," as a sequel to "Red Crossbill Winter" of 1973-74 (see the article under that title in Vol. 22, No. 1-2 of Alabama Birdlife).

The premiere attraction was the Snowy Owl that appeared on Christmas Eve on the antenna atop Waites Appliance and Furniture Company in Opelika, Alabama. It was first viewed by Mr. and Mrs. Waites who generously directed visitors to the various places in town it frequented over the following month and next by Dr. Edward P. Hill, Director of the Alabama Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit at Auburn University, who alerted many out-of-town observers. Immediately photographed by Jimmy Todd of the Opelika-Auburn News, it made front-page headlines in the newspaper. The owl was last sighted on January 18 by John B. Edscorn and party from Lakeland, Florida, and on January 19 by Dr. Howard Einspahr and party. In the interim, it attracted a number of observers from all parts of Alabama and Northwest Florida, Columbus and Atlanta, Georgia, and, as mentioned, Lakeland, Florida, most of whom were fortunate to find the rare bird even though some had to make a second trip. It was also seen by many friendly and gracious citizens of Opelika who told visitors about its activities.

Since there are no trees in the Arctic tundra where it lives, the bird searched out pinnacles such as the Waites' antenna and church domes on which to perch. It, thus, acquired a somewhat religious bent, first frequenting the First Baptist Church steeple and later moving to the dome of the First Methodist Church. It was also seen on water towers in the general area but most often on the Methodist Church dome, which, however, it abandoned for the roofs of some nearby buildings on a Sunday when the church carillon was played through the loud speakers, between two of which it had been spending most of its time. The music was lovely, but it was too much to take at a range of 6 inches!

The Opelika visitor stayed in the downtown area most of the time and did not move around too much, sometimes perching between the loud speakers for an entire day. Then, as evening approached, it apparently got fidgety or hungry and sallied out to catch a rat or two, which some reported to have seen it eating. With an available food supply, so visitors were advised by the local citizens, we are somewhat surprised that it left as early as January; but it was not seen after the above dates.

The bird had a large amount of dark flecking or spotting, so it was definitely an immature and probably a female. Snowys are erratic in their invasions of the United States, the precipitating cause being reduction in the rodent population in Canada. However, it is extremely rare for one to come as far south as the Gulf States. This is only the second record for a Snowy Owl in Alabama, the previous having been on March 17, 1964, at Dauphin Island when Mrs. Jimmie Brown and Mrs. K. L. Shugart from Arkansas found one perched on a rowboat; and one can imagine that their surprise probably even exceeded those of the first observers of the more recent owl in Opelika.

The other activity in the owl family, Strygiformes, to attract attention this past winter was the influx of Short-eared Owls. The first one spotted was on the Marion Christmas Count on December 22. It was observed carefully and very leisurely by the Greg Jackson field party, consisting of himself, Bruce Crider and Bob and Elberta Reid, as it perched on furrows in a field very near the road where the observers were parked. This observation was not altogether unexpected because another had been found dead on the same Christmas Count on December 23, 1973, by Tom Imhof.

The height of the invasion of Short-eareds occurred at Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge where AOS held its winter meeting on January 24-26. On one of the field trips on January 25, Reid Freeman walked through a grassy area near the duck ponds at the southern end of the refuge and stirred up an estimated ten. Lesser numbers were seen throughout the meeting. The highest count over the time the owls were at Eufaula was by Sam Pate of Columbus, Georgia, who saw 23 during January in the same general area with his latest observation being on April 1.

The Short-eared is abroad often during daylight hours, doing much of its hunting at dusk when its flitting moth-like flight is seen over grasslands and marshes. Thus, the habitat at Eufaula Refuge presented a most attractive area for it. The number there this winter exceeds the previous high in abundance for Alabama, which was eight recorded by Bob Skinner and Jim Keeler on January 15, 1960, near Montgomery (see Imhof, Thomas A., Alabama Birds (1961):312-13).

This past winter was indeed a good year for owls, the presence of both species being substantiated by pictures taken by many photographers. All observers, thus, hope that they will return soon.

2616 Mountain Brook Parkway  
Birmingham 35223



Snowy Owl, Second Alabama Record  
(photo by Helen Kittinger)