

LETTERS FROM MILTON TRAUTMAN

Selected by Bill Whan

Editor's note: Here are two letters which Bill Whan found as he delved through Ohio's avian history. He wrote, "Anyone so disposed could go to the OSU Archives, where they have dozens of boxes full of Trautmaniana." As regular Cardinal readers know, Bill spends his time when not birding in a quest for tidbits like these and more from Ohio's bird lore. And he now has a national audience: His article Avian Surprises in the Scientific Collections of an Ohio Museum was recently published in Birding (48:3, June 2016).

The first item is a typed letter from Milton Trautman describing his encounter with a Great Gray Owl:

October 30, 1947

Dear Charles: [It is likely the addressee was Charles Herdendorf, director of the Ohio Sea Grant program and the Stone Laboratory on Lake Erie--BW]

This morning I saw the rarest bird I have ever seen near this island: a Great Gray Owl. That sounds stupid because of the earliness of the season, particularly this extremely warm autumn, and the fact that since returning from Toronto I have been extremely Great Gray conscious.

At 7.00 A.M. I left Chapman's Point for Starve [Island], not realizing that the wind was from the north and rising rapidly. When halfway to Starve I decided that it was too rough to land so I would only circle the island and return. The north wind had risen to 15-25 M.P.H.

When 1/4 mile from Starve I saw about 12 Herring Gulls circling the island which was most unusual. They do not sleep there and in early morning they are hunting food. Then I realized that the gulls were mobbing a huge bird in their center. Going downwind at the right speed the boat was quite steady for such a sea and using my glasses I saw that the mobbed bird was an owl. After circling the island 3 times the owl flew north, directly into the wind and over my head about 5 gunshots up. I watched it until it had flown past Buckeye Point.

When circling downwind the owl flapped very rapidly and lost elevation

rapidly, unlike the gulls which soared downwind. When flying into the wind it flapped regularly and made fair progress.

The owl had fully as great a wing spread as the gulls but the blunt wings looked much bigger than did the pointed gull wings. The long tail was the most impressive thing about the bird; the tail looked almost twice as long as the tails of the Herring Gulls. The tail was never spread, was rounded at the end and faintly barred. The head seemed unusually large, a huge globe. The bird was distinctly black, shades of gray and white, no brown. It had too long a tail and was too black for a Snowy Owl; its tail too long and it lacked the brown of a Great Horned. It had one character which I have not found mentioned in books; it had a dark area under each wing - see the reverse side of this sheet. If convenient would you and/or Josselyn look at some Great Gray wings to see if such an area exists. I don't remember seeing those dark areas particularly in the movies I saw at Toronto. [Josselyn Van Tyne was Curator of what is now the University of Michigan Museum of Natural History.]

This noon I went out to Buckeye Point but saw nothing. May go to Starve tomorrow morning if wind dies down. I am going to keep on the lookout for a rumor of a large owl shot during the coming rabbit season; maybe see Herseberger [sic] and ask him to notify me if someone gets on the plane with a big owl.

Trautman goes on to describe census work with black ducks. He later dictated an account of this encounter to his wife for his last work, *Birds of Western Lake Erie* (posthumously published in 2006), pp. 206-7, which follows:

At daylight on 30 October 1947 while nearing Starve Island in a boat, I saw a Great Gray Owl perched on a limb near the trunk of a tree on the island. The owl was being harassed by a flock of about a dozen Herring Gulls circling above the large tree (Trautman 1956:272-273 [AUK 73(2)]). This owl's plumage was predominantly dusky and not brownish as are the plumages of the Great Horned

Owl; the streaking on the neck and upper breast were vertical and not barred as on Northern Barred Owls; and the huge globular-shaped head contained large facial discs and the irises were yellow. The tail appeared to be far longer in comparison to body length than the tails of the Horned, Barred, and Snowy Owls. Its tail was almost twice the length of the tails of the Herring Gulls. The ventral surface of the tail was barred and the distal end rounded. When I approached within 200 feet of the bird it left the tree and flew past me, whereupon I was able to note that its round-tipped wings were much wider and apparently somewhat longer than were the wings of the Herring Gulls. A darkish area was present in the center of the wings near the base of the primaries on the underside of each wing. The OSUMZ has a specimen of a Great Gray Owl shot by C. C. Allen in November of December of 1898 in Brade's Woods near Hubbard, Trumbull County. This is the only known specimen of the Great Gray Owl collected in Ohio.

Rob Harlan tells the interesting story of the discovery of this specimen in the Fall 1992 issue of the *Ohio Cardinal* (16:1), which is available on the Ohio Ornithological Society website.

The second letter is a reply to a woman from McComb, Ohio who wrote to the OSU Museum to ask about the behavior of terns on Lake Erie. It is dated July 17, 1950:

Dear Mrs. [P]:

Upon my recent return from the West Coast, I found your July 1 letter to Dr. Edward S. Thomas, which he had referred to me for answering. Several things have happened at Starve Island. The following seems to be the most likely:

Common Terns often become psychologically upset when humans visit their nesting colonies and especially when the birds are nest building or incubating. Then the terns do many unpredictable things. For instance, in May, 1949, Roger T. Peterson, my wife and I visited Starve Island to see if Herring Gulls were nesting there. Realizing the danger of disturbing the terns we stayed only a very short time. Even so, a sizable portion of the tern population left their nests and alighted on the water and began bathing furiously. Nor-

mally terns do not alight on water, and then seldom bathe, for if they bathe their feathers become soaked quickly. In a few moments the feathers of these terns were soaked. Realizing what was occurring we dashed out in our boat and got the terns into the air. Some almost did not make it.

As you know, there are many fishermen about the Island in May and June and they and others sometimes picnic on Starve, or go there to see the terns fly about. They did comparatively little damage until about 5 years ago, for before then there were no predators about to eat the tern eggs or young. Until 5 years ago there was only an occasional gull summering about Starve and the other tern nesting colonies. But about 5 years ago Herring Gulls began nesting on Big Chick, driving the former huge Common Tern breeding colony away. Last year Herring Gulls began nesting on Starve and there were up to 300 non-nesting gulls using it as a loafing area. Now, as soon as the humans leave, and before the terns return to their nests, the gulls swoop in and eat the tern eggs or young.

I suspect that with the gulls present in summer, and with the interferences by man, that the Common Tern is doomed as a nesting species in western Lake Erie. Certainly their nesting numbers have greatly decreased in the last 10 years. We will certainly miss them.

Sincerely yours,
Milton B. Trautman