

ELF OWL REDISCOVERED IN LOWER RIO GRANDE DELTA OF TEXAS

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A VIFAUNAL papers on the south Texas region have long included several species which were reported or collected in early days, but for which no recent record (within 50 years) exists. Among such species are the Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*), the Limpkin (*Aramus guarauna*), and the Elf Owl (*Micrathene whitneyi*).

Both visiting and resident observers in the area have been inclined to disregard these and other species in this category which have appeared on such lists. Many believe these birds were mistakenly reported in the first place, or comprised "accidental" records, or were actually collected elsewhere, as in Mexico. Earlier collectors made frequent use of labels with "Brownsville" printed on them, and there is reason to believe that occasionally these labels were inadvertently attached to specimens not in fact taken at Brownsville.

Inclusion of the Elf Owl on the south Texas list (Griscom and Crosby, 1926; Davis, 1955) is based on four specimens taken by F. B. Armstrong before the turn of the century. Sennett (1889) purchased a male specimen collected 5 miles from Hidalgo on 5 April 1889. This specimen (American Museum Collection No. 80966) was designated as the type of the subspecies *idoneus* (now *idonea*) described by Ridgway (1914).

Salvin and Godman (1897) received two specimens taken at Hidalgo from Armstrong. I. C. J. Galbraith (in litt.) reports that these two skins are in the collection of the British Museum (Natural History). Register No. 1890.5.16.99 was collected on 4 April 1889; No. 1890.5.16.100, on 13 April 1889.

The last known specimen collected was a male taken in Brownsville (?) on 14 March 1894. R. M. de Schauensee (in litt.) informs us that this specimen (A.N.S.P. No. 44542) is in the Josiah Hoopes Collection of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. Several Mexican specimens (Ridgway, 1914) in the United States National Museum may also be referable to this form.

Sennett (1889) states that the bird is unexpected in Texas, especially at the low altitude near the Gulf coast. Davis (1955) cites no recent record of the Elf Owl in the delta area. Hence, it would appear worthy of note to report the rediscovery of *Micrathene whitneyi* in what is possibly that very area in which it was first collected by Armstrong almost 70 years ago.

In 1960, the annual spring bird count of the lower Rio Grande delta was held on 1 May. The day proved to be particularly good (260 species recorded) because of a rare combination of ideal weather conditions. How-

ever, as may often occur on such counts, certain birds that should have been seen were unreported at the time of the evening tally. Among those was the Ferruginous Owl (*Glaucidium brasilianum*). Knowing that this species was in an area near their residence southwest of Mission, Texas, Mr. and Mrs. Luhe McConnell volunteered to go out that night to look for and to listen for it. The next day Mr. McConnell telephoned to report they had found the Ferruginous Owl and that there was also another little owl with a very different call in the area. He asked that we come over and check the owl to see whether it might possibly be an Elf Owl as Mrs. McConnell suspected.

We arrived at the McConnell residence about 7 PM and almost immediately heard whimpering, puppylike calls in the early darkness. For 10 to 15 minutes we listened and watched one or two small birds fly back and forth between mesquite trees and a storage building on the premises. Several times a bird appeared to go into an old woodpecker hole in a nearby upright timber.

One bird was caught when it flew down the beam of a heavy-duty flashlight and landed on a mesquite limb just above the authors. It was taken inside, carefully examined, measured (total body length 137 mm), and identified as an Elf Owl. It was then released.

About a week later the birds had disappeared from that particular vicinity. Whether their departure was a normal one or was due to frequent observation and some attempted photography is not known. However, they and/or other pairs were subsequently located in the general area. On one occasion at about 9 PM an individual was watched for approximately 10 minutes flying about in a mesquite tree. All of this time the owl carried a mesquite bean which he moved back and forth in his mouth. We assume that the owl was eating ants or other insects from the pod, since mesquite beans normally are heavily infested with various insects.

Elf Owls nested in the area at least a year previous to the 1960 observations. A young one (whose identity was not established at the time) was found by the McConnells in their yard and was kept in captivity for several weeks until it died. We did not know of the incident until 1960. The skin was not saved, but the young bird was photographed by P. B. Myers of McAllen, Texas.

In 1961, Elf Owls were located in four places in the general area and are believed to have nested at three of these locations. One pair raised at least two young in the cavity of the original timber beside the storage building in the McConnells' backyard. We photographed an adult and one of its young. After the second young bird left the nest, the family group stayed in the immediate area for several days.

That the species could occur in such a well-populated area and yet remain undetected for nearly 70 years is rather remarkable. The most probable explanation is that there are relatively few people in the lower Rio Grande

delta of Texas who are actively interested in birds. Of those, the even fewer serious-minded bird students usually have a rather limited amount of time at their disposal.

Many ornithologists, both amateurs and otherwise, visit the area annually. Chiefly concerned with adding "new" birds to their list, they contact local people for specific sites where they can locate a particular bird they have heretofore missed. Most of these people visit the national wildlife refuges first (Laguna Atascosa on the Gulf coast and Santa Ana up the Rio Grande River) and often do not have time to go farther west. Until the last few years, only rarely did visitors travel west of Santa Ana just to look at birds. Also, since the Elf Owl has been considered as not occurring in south Texas for so many years, apparently no one has bothered to look specifically for it. Since the habitat of the Elf Owl is so localized and since few people have reason to be in the border brush areas at night, it actually is not too surprising that these little owls have escaped detection for so long.

Of course, it is possible that the Elf Owl has not been here continually since it was originally collected in 1889. Considering all aspects of the situation, however, we feel that it has been inhabiting this same general area since the days of Armstrong and Sennett. The extent of the population of this rare permanent resident has not yet been determined, but certainly it is very small. "Progress" has wiped out most of the brushland in this region. The plots of heavy brush along the river are very few in number and limited in acreage. Each year a little more of the area is cleared. On the Mexican side of the river the land has been cleared even more extensively and completely than on the U.S. side.

Brandt (1951) points out that the Arizona form of the Elf Owl does not hesitate to nest near human habitation. Such also seems to be the case with the Texas race. He suggests that the attraction of night-flying insects to lights may be one of the reasons for this habit. The same assumption seems plausible here, since each of the sites noted in our observations has been located near lights. However, without other more natural habitats it is doubtful that the population can survive indefinitely. One probable factor endangering its survival is the possibility of the birds' feeding on insects that have come in contact with the numerous crop sprays and insecticides that are used heavily in this region. The birds reported were nesting within 100 feet of a cotton field. However, if no further depredations are made upon the habitat or the species, it would appear that the Elf Owl in the lower Rio Grande Valley may possibly survive another 65 years.

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NEW LIFE MEMBER



Harvey B. Lovell, of Louisville, Kentucky, an active member of the Wilson Ornithological Society since 1936, is a new Life Member. Dr. Lovell, Professor of Biology at the University of Kentucky, received his A.B. degree from Bowdoin College and his A.M. and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard University. His principal ornithological interests are nesting activities and bird banding.

Dr. Lovell has published papers in four state and four regional ornithological journals, has co-authored two books on ornithology and zoology, and has authored a manual for honey plants. In addition, he is a member of and has taken active roles in the AOU, Sigma Xi, Inland Bird Banding Association, Kentucky Ornithological Society, Kentucky Academy of Science, and Kentucky Society of Natural History.