

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

OWLS

By Clive E. Goodwin

Early in 2005 a Northern Hawk Owl spent the best part of three months hunting along a nondescript section of County Road 2 west of Welcome. It's unlikely that any regular readers of this column who were here in 2005 failed to see this bird, as there was usually a crowd of people on the opposite side of the road watching it! Since the first record in 1817 we have had over 16 hawk owls reported in the County, all between October 30 and March 17. All have been singles except the first, a November observation by Fothergill, who noted 'many specimens fell into my hands' suggesting that the bird's status at that time was very different from the present day.

In some ways the 2005 sighting was rather typical of many of our owl records: it was in the middle of winter, and almost half of our owl sightings are from winter; it drew hordes of birders, with sadly predictable episodes of bad behaviour from a few individuals; and the bird seemed engagingly tame. Then it was a rarity, and while owls one can see readily without some sort of special effort are always noteworthy, this bird was a genuine rarity. Only Boreal Owl has fewer records, and that is a smaller bird that spends its days hidden in dense cover, so is undoubtedly more common than our 16 records would suggest. But of course, unlike most other owls, the Northern Hawk Owl hunts during the day.

Our owls fall into three broad groups, with overlaps between two of them. First, all by itself, is the Barn Owl. It is a southerner, with a limited foothold in the Province, and only three have occurred in Northumberland, two of which were dead, so its occurrences here must be considered accidental. There are 10 other owl species that occur here with varying degrees of regularity, 4 of them northerners that can be found here occasionally in winter, when the numbers of the rodents on which they prey in the north crash [two of these, of course, are the Boreal Owl and Northern Hawk Owl]. The other 6 species have nested here, although half only seem to nest in very small numbers, and perhaps not even regularly, so our records of them are mostly from outside the breeding season.

First, because it's easier, let's look more closely at the northerners. Snowy Owl, a tundra bird, immediately comes to mind, and [if one excludes numbers from banding stations] it has yielded far more records [548] of more birds [692, because some records are of more than one bird] than any other owl. Flights seem to occur at roughly 4-5 year intervals, but there is quite a lot of variation; certainly 1991-94 and 2008-9 were exceptionally high years, which had been preceded by unusually long periods with few or none. A Snowy or two seem to be reported in most winters, and remember that the season spans two years, so for example 2008-9 was last winter.

Great Gray Owls are much less common [125 reports], but when they move it is usually in some numbers. The birds are large, dramatic creatures that tend to stay for periods in conspicuous locations, and like hawk owls, they are approachable. Perhaps needless to

say, Great Gray flights are among the most keenly anticipated of all bird movements! The flights themselves are sufficiently rare that the wait can be a long time. We have records of single birds or very small numbers at roughly 4-5 year intervals, but our first recorded larger movement was in 1979: at least 12 birds, mainly west of Port Hope. A hiatus followed until the 1995-7 period which yielded 34 reports, and then in 2004-05 we had 50 reports; and no more to date apart from isolated sightings in the early New Years of 2008 and 2009. You'll note that the peak dates differ from those of the Snowy; this is a bird of the taiga and open coniferous forests, and here it must compete with Long-eared, Boreal and hawk owls, so it is not surprising to find that its peaks also coincide with some of our few Boreal and Northern Hawk Owl appearances.

Great Horned is our most frequently reported resident owl [368 reports]: nesting in old hawk or crow nests as early as February, its ear tufts sticking up above the open nests are a sure sign of its presence. In contrast, both Barred Owl and Eastern Screech Owl, our other two 'common' species, are cavity nesters, and are harder to find. The numbers of all three show increases in the 90's, paralleling the improved coverage in this period. But none of them can really be described as common. The breeding bird atlas reveals that both Great Horned and screech owls are generally distributed across the County, and neither seems to show much evidence of seasonal movements, although the 152 records we have of screech owl are hardly enough to yield a reliable picture of its status. Great Horned numbers seem to have dropped sharply over the last three years, raising concerns about possible West Nile virus infection.

Barred Owl is confined to more extensive areas of woodland, and although our dataset is still small [243], a careful analysis yields evidence of late fall and winter movements in some years, presumably as well as the resident population. Four recent winters, 2000-1, 2004-5, 2005-6 and 2007-8, all tell a story of birds appearing in places they are not normally seen. One of the most unlikely was a bird sitting on a power pole on Charles Street outside our living room window in downtown Cobourg on October 30, 2005!

Which brings us to the Long and Short-eared Owls, and the Northern Saw-whet Owl. All three of these have in common relatively few records [excluding those from banding stations, between 112 and 139] and even fewer breeding season records [between 19 and 24]. The Summer Bird Count has only 2 records for the entire group, and the neither atlases recorded birds in more than 5 squares for any of the three.

The saw-whet exhibits some migratory movement, although banding by Roger Frost and Elizabeth Kellogg suggests that in fall this consists mainly of young birds: nevertheless, almost 56% of our records are from the traditional migration periods, and this is probably an understatement, as in spring a few birds may move north as early as February. But it's an elusive little owl, mainly because of its size, spending its days tucked in heavy foliage, sometimes in the tops of vine tangles, sometimes in a small conifer.

There seems to be some migration by Short-eared Owl as well. Elsewhere birds have been reported as flying in off the Lake, and we have 8 records from Cobourg harbour, 6 of which were in migration periods; these were birds that would certainly be passing

through. Short-eareds are open country owls and they will sometimes move and hunt in daylight, so are more readily seen. However, their movements are difficult to interpret, as wintering overlaps with dispersal which in turn overlaps with nesting. Long-eareds, by contrast, are among the most elusive of owls, and it's hard to determine if the birds we sometimes see in winter are local residents or visitors from further north. In winter Long and Short-eared Owls often behave rather similarly, roosting in groups and sometimes foraging at dusk. Lakeshore Road west of Port Hope has been one of the more reliable areas to see such behaviour over the years, but on the whole the County does not seem to attract these regular winter owl roosts – or maybe we just haven't found the rest yet!

In closing a word on observing owls might be in order. Owls can seem very tame and it is tempting approach them closely. Unfortunately what we interpret as tameness is more likely to be what is called 'cryptic' behaviour, as owls rely on immobility for concealment. Accordingly a very close approach can be stressful for the bird, particularly in wintertime when the owl may already be stressed by food shortages and weather. Particularly use care when photographing, as firing a flash in the face of an owl staring straight at the camera could harm the bird's eyesight. There's controversy on this point, but it's better to err on the side of caution.

All that said, with luck the next few months may indeed yield some owl viewing opportunities!