

THE 1978-79 GREAT GRAY OWL INVASION IN NEW YORK STATE

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During the winter and spring of 1978-79, the greatest invasion of Great Gray Owls (*Strix nebulosa*) ever recorded in North America occurred in northeastern United States and southern Canada (Vickery and Yunick, 1979). Over 338 reports were gathered. New York had 64 reports (previously reported as 60, but revised based on additional information)—a number that is double all of the reported sightings in the previous century. This paper summarizes these reports and compares this occurrence with the species' past history.

Records of this species in the state stretch back to 1873 (Bull, 1974). In 1971 when a Great Gray appeared at Halfmoon, Saratoga County and its photograph was published as part of the series, "Photographs of New York State Rarities" (Yunick, 1972), I reviewed the previous records, and referred to this bird as the 26th state record. In the interim, six additional records prior to 1971, and one since then have come to my attention. In addition, further checking of earlier records has revealed duplication of two records in the previous count, and these should be deleted; they are: the Painted Post record in the 1957 *AOU Check-List* which is the same as Eaton's (1912) and Wood's (1888) Steuben County record; and the Mt. Sinai record cited by Eaton (1912) and Bull (1964). The additions are: the previously referred to record from Fulton County, cited in the 1957 *AOU Check-List*, actually involved two birds: one on 15 November 1906 and the other on 16 December 1906 (Alexander, 1907). The remaining old records are an 11 April 1873 specimen from Locust Grove, Lewis County (Bull, 1974); a bird near Canastota, Madison County, in 1926-27 (Stoner, 1945); two birds near Pulaski, Oswego County, on 20 January 1962 (Bulger, 1962); and a questionable sighting at Sandy Creek, Oswego County, in February 1962 (Peakall and Rusk, 1962). The new record is of a sighting on 24 January 1978 near Plattsburgh, Clinton County, (Mack, 1978).

These records bring the reported total, prior to this recent invasion, to 31 birds (see Map 1 for distribution). During the ten decades from 1870 through 1969, the number of reports varies from one to four per decade, and has averaged three per decade. Franklin and St. Lawrence Counties, with four reports each, are the counties

where the species has most frequently been reported. With this as background, one can more fully appreciate the scope of this year's invasion, which produced 64 reports in 90 days.

The 1978-79 invasion began with a New Year's Eve sighting just before dusk near Jay, Essex County. Characteristic of about one-third of the Great Gray Owls seen this season, this bird was seen only on that one day, despite efforts to relocate it the following day. On 8 January the excitement shifted to Lloyd's Neck, Long Island, where one appeared and remained for 81 days, the longest recorded stay of any of this year's invaders, and a new state record for length of stay in one location.

Then a sprinkle of owls began to appear in St. Lawrence County in mid-January. By the last third of January, reports of new sightings in two principal areas—the northwestern tier and Capital District—greatly increased in frequency. From 21 January to 28 February, 50 of the 64 sightings (78 percent) were reported. In March, reports of new sightings dropped sharply, and only three birds, all previously reported, lingered into April.

Certain relevant data on the 64 reported sightings are summarized in Table 1. Among these reports, 29 were reported by Chamberlaine (1979, 1979a and pers. comm.), 20 were summarized by me (Yunick, 1979), two were reported by Huggins (1979, 1979a), one by Mack (1979), two by Spencer (1979, 1979a) and ten of them (Nos. 1, 6, 8, 21, 23, 28, 33, 49, 51 and 58 in Table 1) are reported here for the first time, having eluded the normal regional reporting system.

While gathering and verifying these data, I became aware that there might be some duplication of reports in areas of high concentration; that some reports might have been inaccurate, erroneous or incompletely communicated even by experienced observers or reporters; and that some of the rejected reports might have been genuine Great Gray Owls. Therefore, the total number reported here should be regarded as an indication of the order of magnitude of the invasion, and not as an exact count, even though reasonable care was taken to exclude dubious reports and to verify wherever possible any reasonable report that was received.

In the Schenectady area, as Dial-A-Bird editor, I processed reports of over 80 owls and found considerable inaccuracy on the part of the reporting public. Seventeen of the 80 reports were either convincingly described or verified as authentic reports of six other species of owls, swept into the reporting system on the wave of Great Gray

Owl reports. However, over one-half of another 17 reports, which proved to be Barred Owls (*Strix varia*), were originally reported as Great Gray Owls. A picture of a Barred Owl even appeared in a local newspaper misidentified as a Great Gray Owl. Another 28 reports of Great Gray Owls were unverified or unconvincing and were therefore rejected. Finally, 22 reports of Great Gray Owls were accepted as such based on rigorous investigation or verification by photograph, specimen or corroborated sighting. Thus, based on the Schenectady experience, only 22 reports out of a reported total of 55 or 60 were accepted as Great Gray Owls.

In that regard I have also rejected two St. Lawrence County reports. VanRiet (pers. comm.) had labeled both of these sightings as "probable" as opposed to others that he had labeled "positive." Both were rejected because they were not convincingly described by the persons reporting them to VanRiet. They were a bird reported on 9 February in Louisville, described as a fluffy owl seen flying overhead in a barn; and one on 17-18 March in Brasher Center, reported by three non-birders as a large owl on a post. Chamberlaine (pers. comm.) also rejected reports of alleged Great Gray Owls, but the number he rejected is not known.

Probably never before in the state's history has the general public become as involved in an ornithological event as it did in this invasion. The publicity associated with the Long Island sighting (Wheat, 1979) and the extensive television and newspaper coverage in the Capital District and elsewhere produced a great awareness of owls, and led to the large number of reports received by Dial-A-Bird and others. Because of this high level of involvement of persons of varying birding skill, the authenticity of some of these reports is questionable, resulting in the high rejection rate noted above. Despite these inaccurate reports, the extent of public participation was greatly appreciated. It provided expanded reporting that went far beyond what a local community of serious birders could provide.

While the 31 previous reports originated from 16 counties, this invasion involved sightings from 17 counties and expanded the composite total to 24 counties. Among the new sightings, the greatest number originated from Jefferson (16), St. Lawrence (12), Saratoga (8) and Rensselaer and Albany counties (6 each). The composite list is headed by the same counties, with Jefferson and St. Lawrence at 16 each, followed by Saratoga with nine, Rensselaer with seven, and Albany with six. It is interesting that Jefferson County, which had

never before had a Great Gray Owl report, proved to be one of the centers of concentration for the species during this invasion. Its proximity to Amherst Island, Ontario, where an unprecedented total of 34 Great Gray Owls was tallied amid a large number of owls of nine other species, may well have been a factor (see Bell, Phelan and Wypkema, 1979, for an account of this unusual influx on Amherst Island). Depauville, in Jefferson County, also contributed the new state record of four owls seen in one area in one day on 3 and 4 February (Chamberlaine, 1979).

In general, the sightings were concentrated in three areas: Watertown, Massena-Potsdam and Capital District (see Map 2 for distribution). There appears to have been no major range extension of the species within the state, just a tremendous magnification in number of reports over what had been experienced previously. Even the Long Island reports do not represent new territory because of two previous records for that area, the last being at Orient in 1902. Except for the two reports at Oswego, the southern shore of Lake Ontario and the area lying in its shadow to the south was devoid of reports, despite the fact that nine of the 31 pre-invasion reports came from the shore or southward lee of Lake Ontario. Only a single report, the original sighting at Jay, came from Adirondack State Park. The great majority of sighting locations was at low elevations and reasonably close to water (Lake Ontario, Lake Champlain, Long Island Sound) or in river valleys (St. Lawrence, Black, Raquette, St. Regis, Mohawk, Hudson).

A new late departure date was established. Bull (1974) reported previous extreme dates of 15 November and 11 April. One of the two Oswego birds noted here stayed until 15 April (Maxwell, pers. comm.), and there was an unverified report, not accepted here, that this bird stayed until 29 April. The latest regional date of which I am currently aware is of a sighting on 13 May of an injured bird at St. Catherine's, Ontario, on the Niagara Frontier (*vide* Buffalo Rare Bird Alert). With an invasion of this magnitude, one would have expected the state extreme dates to be extended by more than just one report. However, the timing of the invasion, and the length of stay of these owls in one place, appeared to affect their departure dates. The length of stay appears to have been related to the physical condition of some of the birds.

As previously mentioned, late January through February was the time of peak reporting activity. The greatest number of reports was received in February, as seen below.

<u>Month</u>	<u>Number of new reports received</u>
December	1
January	16
February	38
March	9
Total	64

These reports were classified into the following categories:

Alive, reported one day only	19
Alive, reported for more than one day	26
Found dead/injured on date of first sighting	5
Alive, subsequently shot	5
No exact information on length of stay	9

Based on the 26 birds seen for more than one day, the average recorded stay was 16.4 days (range, 3-81). Among the birds that were shot, the average length of time between first report and shooting was 11.0 days (range, 3-20). The average of these two categories and the 19 one-day sightings is 10.0 days (range, 1-81). The observation that about one-third of these sightings were one day only suggests that some of these birds may have been severely food stressed and either expired due to starvation, or had to move on in search of more favorable hunting territory.

Two owls were banded. R. P. Guthrie banded one in Colonie on 25 February (Table 1, No. 52) (Guthrie, 1979), and I banded one on 4 April (No. 64) at Vischer Ferry. The Vischer Ferry bird had an old eye injury which appeared to affect its ability to hunt. It behaved sluggishly, but was able to fly and attacked a mouse-baited trap before being captured by hand in an apple tree. By the following day, it was so emaciated that it could not fly, and it was recaptured and taken to a veterinarian, but did not respond to treatment. It was given to the New York State Museum at Albany. Two other owls, the Cohoes shooting victim (No. 36) and the Pillar Point capture (No. 56), were also treated by the same veterinarian with the intent of returning the rehabilitated birds to Canada by airplane for release. However, their injuries were sufficiently severe that, while both survived, they could not be returned to wild flight.

Other specimens received by New York State Museum were as follows: the North Lawrence bird (No. 4), the Hammond car kill (No. 46), the Saratoga National Historic Park bird (No. 49) and the one found dead at West Sand Lake (No. 50) were received. As of October 1979, these birds had not yet been prepared and logged into the

collection, so that their specimen numbers are not yet available. One of the five specimens is destined to go to Buffalo Museum of Natural Science to augment its collection (Reilly, pers. comm.). The sixth reported preserved specimen was the Centerport casualty (No. 59) that was given to Theodore Roosevelt Sanctuary at Oyster Bay (Spencer, 1979a).

Despite the familiarity that many of the state's birders developed with this species during this invasion, it remains to be seen what change will take place in the species' status, if any. For many years this sedentary owl has been regarded as rare, and only when hunting conditions in its normal boreal range are poor does the species visit New York State. As mentioned earlier, reported instances of its appearance have averaged only three per decade prior to this invasion. Most all of the previous reports on its abundance status rate it as rare. Among the earliest was Johnson's (1895) assessment that it was rare and occurred once about every ten years at Boonville. MacArtny commenting to Stoner (1945) in a letter of 1939 covering the previous 60 years of records at Ft. Covington rated the species as a rare winter resident being "seen at various times." Alexander (1907) called it rare and somewhat irregular in eastern New York. Bull (1974) described it as very rare. There is also early documentation that at least some individuals have appeared emaciated as reported by Wood (1888) concerning the bird shot near Painted Post by a chicken farmer.

Based on an assessment of the overall 1978-79 northeastern invasion (Vickery and Yunick, 1979), and on the increasing frequency and extent of recent invasions in the North-Central U.S., Ontario, and Quebec, there may be either an heretofore unrecognized central or eastern Canadian population of this species, or a recent range extension into eastern Canada. In either case, it may well be the beginning of increased incursions into New York at times of northern food shortages. It is a situation which deserves careful watching and documentation. However, every effort should be made to have skilled observers verify reported sightings of this species, because experience forcefully illustrated in 1978-79 that other species are easily confused as Great Gray Owls by some unskilled observers.

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TABLE 1
NEW YORK STATE GREAT GRAY OWL REPORTS – WINTER/SPRING 1978-79

<u>No.</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>Duration of stay</u>	<u>Source</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Comment</u>
1	31 Dec	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Lee	Jay, Essex Co.	Seen by Tom and Andy Gardner, reported <i>fide</i> P. and G. Randorff, J. M. C. Peterson
2	8 Jan-29 Mar	81 days	<i>fide</i> Spencer	Lloyd's Neck, Suffolk Co.	Seen by mob
3	9 Jan	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Pierrepont, St. Law. Co.	Seen by D. Hamelin of DEC
4	ca 14-28 Jan	14 days	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine, VanRiet	N. Lawrence, St. Law. Co.	Shot by N. Newton, in NYSM, W. Stone's records place date of death at 1 Feb.
5	mid-Jan	7 days	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine, VanRiet	Winthrop, St. Law. Co.	Seen by Mr. Stanka/Mrs. Streeter
6	21 Jan	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Sabin, Lee	Plattsburgh, Clinton Co.	Seen by M. Stickney of DEC
7	23 Jan	1 day only	Able	Berne, Albany Co.	Seen by K. P. and M. Able
8	23 Jan	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Lee	Essex, Essex Co.	Seen by Mr. Welkirk, reported by J. M. C. Peterson
9	27 Jan-4 Feb	9 days**	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Depauville, Jefferson Co.	Seen by T. Carr and others
10	27 Jan-7 Feb	12 days	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine, VanRiet	Robt. Moses St. Park, St. Lawrence Co.	Seen by J. VanRiet and others
11	29-31 Jan	3 days	Yunick	Rotterdam, Schenectady Co.	Reported to DAB by R. Weber, seen by mob
12	30 Jan-17 Feb	19 days**	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Depauville, Jefferson Co.	Seen by R. Brouse and others
13	31 Jan-19 Feb	20 days**	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Depauville, Jefferson Co.	Seen by R. Walker and others
14,15	Late-Jan to mid-Feb		<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Adams, Jefferson Co.	Seen by D. Hurley of DEC
16	"		<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Rutland, Jefferson Co.	Seen by D. Hurley of DEC
17	"		<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Three-mile Pt., Jefferson Co.	Seen by D. Hurley of DEC
18	"		<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	LeRay, Jefferson Co.	Seen by D. Hurley of DEC
19	"		<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Canton-Waterman Hill, St. Lawrence Co.	Seen by D. Hurley of DEC

20	Late-Jan to mid-Feb		<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Colton, St. Law. Co.	Seen by D. Hurley of DEC
21	"		<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Poland, Herkimer Co.	Seen by D. Hurley of DEC
22	2-22 Feb	21 days	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Castorland, Lewis Co.	Seen by C. Whitefield of DEC, photographed
23	3 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine, VanRiet	Dickinson, Franklin Co.	Seen by R. Smiddy and others
24	3 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Mack	Plattsburgh, Clinton Co.	Seen by C. Mitchell
25	3 Feb-10 Mar	36 days**	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Depauville, Jefferson Co.	Seen by W. Lloyd and others
26	4 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Carthage, Jefferson Co.	Photo by E. Haley, W'town Times
27	5-14 Feb	10 days	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Luther, Rensselaer Co.	Reported to DAB by H. Draffen
28	5 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Crumb	Fayetteville, Onon. Co.	Seen by S. and D. McCabe
29	6-15 Feb	10 days	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Henderson, Jefferson Co.	Seen by J. Franke of DEC
30	7-28 Feb	22 days	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine, VanRiet	Helena, St. Lawrence Co.	Seen by R. Cornell, photo verified by VanRiet
31	7 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Rexford, Saratoga Co.	Reported to DAB by J. Young
32	9-16 Feb	8 days	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine, VanRiet	Massena Springs, St. Lawrence Co.	First seen by R. Brownell, then by M. Dempsey 4 mi. away and believed to be the same bird
33	10 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Crumb	Oriskany, Oneida Co.	Photo by NYS trooper D. Cesari
34	10 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Ft. Edward, Washington Co.	Photo by J. Maston
35	10 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Clayton, Jefferson Co.	Seen by J. Wilson of DEC
36	12-15 Feb	4 days	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Cohoes, Albany Co.	Reported to DEC and DAB, seen by mob, shot 15 Feb
37	12-16 Feb	5 days	<i>fide</i> Yunick	West Sand Lake, Renss. Co.	Reported by Mrs. Sullo to DAB, confirmed by R. Phillion
38	12 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Antwerp, Jefferson Co.	Seen by D. Hurley of DEC
39	12 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Yunick	W. of Ballston Spa., Saratoga Co.	Reported to DAB by Mr. & Mrs. F. Lee
40	13-15 Feb	3 days	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Canton, St. Lawrence Co.	Seen by J. Montan and W. Gordon of DEC
41	15-23 Feb	9 days	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Halfmoon, Saratoga Co.	Reported to DAB by members of DiStefano family

42	ca 1-15 Feb	14 days	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Rensselaer, Rensselaer Co.	Two birds reported to appear about 2 weeks before 15 Feb
43	ca 1-20 Feb	20 days	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Rensselaer, Rensselaer Co.	One shot 15 Feb, other on ca 20 Feb. Photo and seen by mob
44	17 Feb-24 Mar	36 days	Crumb, Maxwell, <i>fide</i> Huggins	Oswego, Oswego Co.	Photo by D. Crumb
45	19 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Chaumont, Jefferson Co.	Seen by E. Smith of DEC
46	19 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Hammond, St. Lawrence Co.	Carkill recovered by J. Rogers, given to NYSM, W. Stone's records indicate date of death as 15 Feb.
47	19 Feb	"seen 2-3 days"	<i>fide</i> Sabin	Eagle Mills, Rensselaer Co.	Seen by Clickner family
48	19 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Marx	Vischer Ferry, Saratoga Co.	Seen by P. Cote and 3 others, reported to DAB
49	19 Feb-10 Mar	19 days	<i>fide</i> Gibson, Urbaetis	Saratoga National Historic Park, Saratoga Co.	Seen alive on 19 Feb but not responsive. Found dead 10 Mar. by S. de la Rosa. Delivered by J. Urbaetis to DEC
50	20 Feb	found dead	<i>fide</i> Yunick	W. Sand Lake, Rensselaer Co.	Reported to DAB, specimen to DEC then to NYS Museum
51	Sev. weeks in Feb.	21 days	<i>fide</i> Crumb	Sherburne, Chenango Co.	Newspaper report by B. P. Burt
52	22-25 Feb	4 days	Guthrie	Colonie, Albany Co.	Banded, photo and seen by mob
53	22-24 Feb	3 days	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Charlton, Saratoga Co.	Reported to DAB by residents of Charlton Rd.
54	27 Feb-15 Apr	48 days	Crumb, Maxwell, <i>fide</i> Huggins	Oswego, Oswego Co.	Photo by D. Crumb
55	28 Feb	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Fargo, Jefferson Co.	Seen by R. Adams of DEC
56	3 Mar	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Chamberlaine	Pillar Pt., Jefferson Co.	Captured and sent to vet by R. and J. Walker
57	8-19 Mar	12 days	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Coeymans, Albany Co.	Reported to DAB by L. Roth, photo by R. Duncan, confirmed by R. P. Guthrie

58	9 Mar	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Stone, Cook	Colonie, Albany Co.	Found dead as an apparent car kill by J. Cook, given to W. Stone of DEC, thence to NYSM
59	12 Mar	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Spencer	Centerport, Suffolk Co.	Found dead, specimen to T. Roosevelt Sanc., Oyster Bay
60	16-18 Mar	3 days	<i>fide</i> VanRiet	Stockholm Center, St. Lawrence Co.	Photo by B. Dendler, confirmed by J. VanRiet
61	18-20 Mar	3 days	<i>fide</i> Able	Voorheesville, Albany Co.	Photo confirmed by K. P. Able, bird subsequently shot
62	22 Mar-5 Apr	15 days	<i>fide</i> VanRiet, Chamberlaine	Colton, St. Lawrence Co.	Photo by R. Randall, confirmed by J. VanRiet
63	28 Mar	1 day only	<i>fide</i> Yunick	Clifton Park, Saratoga Co.	Reported to DAB by several observers and State Police
64	30 Mar-5 Apr	7 days	Yunick, <i>fide</i> Palmer, Able	Vischer Ferry, Saratoga Co.	Banded 4 Apr.

Sources: William J. Lee for DAB, Barbara J. Spencer (1979, 1979a), Lee B. Chamberlaine (pers. comm. and 1979, 1979a), J. VanRiet (pers. comm.), K. P. Able for DAB, Ted Mack (1979), Dorothy W. Crumb (pers. comm.), William Gibson (pers. comm.), John Urbaetis of DEC, Gene Huggins (1979, 1979a), Walton B. Sabin for DAB, Robert L. Marx for DAB, Richard P. Guthrie for DAB, G. R. Maxwell (pers. comm.), Ward Stone of DEC, James Cook, Leland R. Palmer and Robert P. Yunick for DAB. DAB=Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club's Dial-A-Bird telephone answering service, DEC=Department of Environmental Conservation, NYSM=New York State Museum.

** The situation at Depauville was difficult to assess accurately. Based on the reports that there was one bird "a few days before 30 Jan.," two birds on 28 Jan., three birds on 31 Jan. and a maximum of four on 3 and 4 Feb., only four birds were counted. To determine duration of stay, the following information was used: three birds stayed to 17 Feb., two to 19 Feb., and one to 10 Mar. It is not known exactly which bird stayed for each exact period, however, in determining the average, this did not matter.



