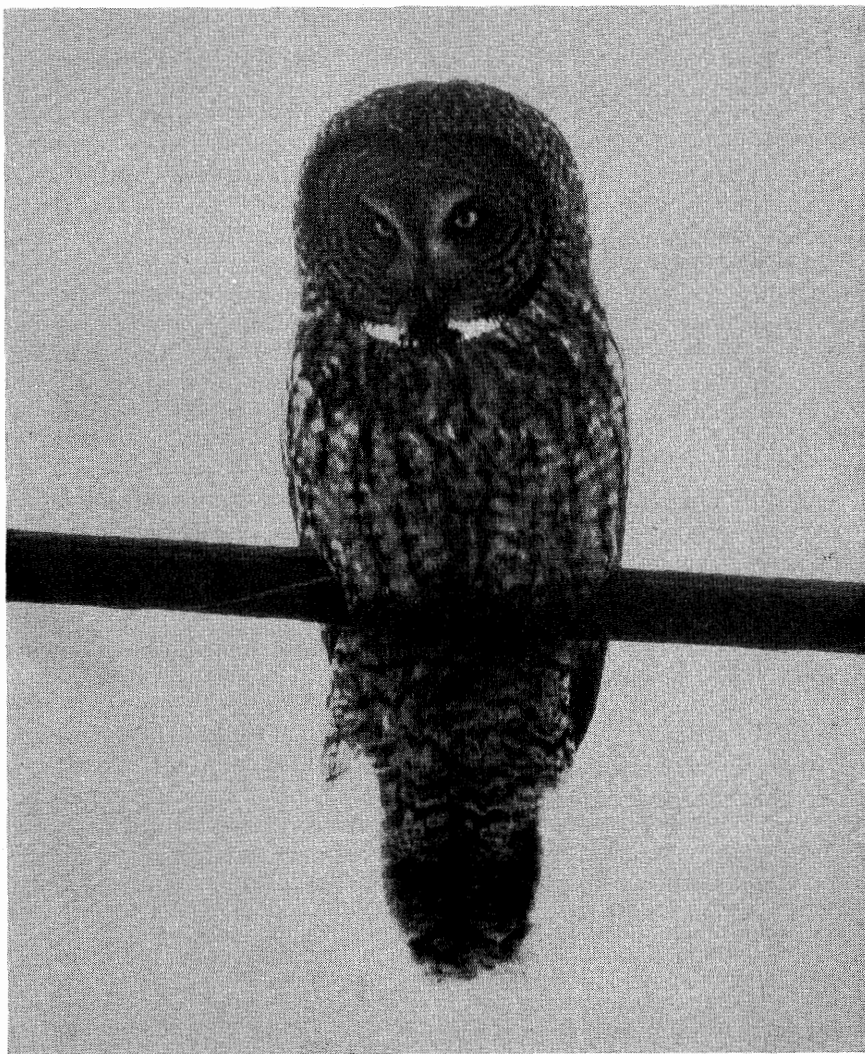


PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK STATE RARITIES

21. Great Gray Owl



Photograph by Robert P. Yunick

Harris Road, near Halfmoon, Saratoga County, N.Y., March 1971

The Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*) is an holarctic species that breeds in the boreal forests of Alaska, western Canada, the Rocky Moun-

tains and North Central contiguous United States and occurs east to Ontario. It winters in its breeding range and occasionally into northern New York, and casually south of the state (*AOU Check-list*: 286, 1957; and Bull, *Birds of the New York Area*, Harper and Row, N.Y., 274, 1964).

This past winter (1970-71) a male (sex determined by wing chord length) appeared on Harris Road near Halfmoon in Saratoga County in late February and was viewed and photographed by many members of the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club in early March. On March 10, 1971 I captured the bird with a mouse-baited Bal-chatri trap, and it was banded by Dr. W. D. Merritt, Jr. of Rexford. It was last seen on Harris Road on March 13 and was thought to have departed with the warming weather of March 13-15, which brought in many migrants. However, on March 19 some publicity on the bird appeared in a Troy newspaper, and on March 20 a woman having seen the newspaper article called to say that she and her husband had seen this bird in their yard that morning, about three miles from where the bird had been seen previously on Harris Road. They gave a convincing description of the bird, and due to the proximity of the two locations, it could have been the same individual. This was the last report of the bird.

The accompanying photograph was taken late in the afternoon of March 10, 1971 at Harris Road. This picture was shot under poor light conditions as a 35-mm. slide at 14 feet with a 200-mm. telephoto lens. Mr. Lawrence King of Schenectady kindly provided black-and-white prints of the color transparencies.

A search of the state's ornithological literature reveals the following records for the species.

To 1912 Eaton (*N.Y.S. Museum 66th Annual Report*: 3 (1912), 116-7, published by the Univ. of the State of N.Y. in 1914) listed 12 records as follows: Marcy, Oneida County, February 1875; Adirondacks, March 1879; Steuben County, February 10, 1887; Watson, Lewis County, December 17, 1889; New York State, 1889; White Lake, Oneida County, February 1895; St. Lawrence County, three specimens, 1890-95; Mt. Sinai, Suffolk County, date unknown; Rensselaer County, date unknown; Seneca Castle, Ontario County, January 1907.

In 1938 (*Auk*, 55: 279-80) Stoner cited 1) the records of Eaton; 2) a Franklin County record reported by W. DeW. Milles (*Auk*, 32: 228, 1915); and 3) published for the first time information on a specimen shot in the autumn of 1919 at Great Tupper Lake in St. Lawrence County and presented to the State Museum in 1937. At that time, Stoner indicated that these 14 records were the only published ones known to him for the species in the state.

In 1945 (*Auk*, 62: 629-30) Stoner published two additional records that had come to his attention, namely that of a specimen shot March 15, 1883 at Ft. Covington, Franklin County, and one of a wounded, caged

specimen of January 16, 1931 from Westville, Franklin County. Mrs. Stoner kindly provided reprints of her husband's papers for this review.

The AOU *Check-list* of 1957 cites records from Painted Post and Fulton County with no dates given.

Only one record appears in 21 years of field notes in *The Kingbird* beginning in 1950. Meade (Vol. 5 (1): 24, 1955) reported a sighting of a bird in a deep wooded swamp by Agnes Amstutz near Tupper Lake on March 5, 1955. The only other recent records appear in Beardslee and Mitchell's *Birds of the Niagara Frontier Region* (*Bull. Buffalo Soc. Nat. Hist.*, 22: 283, 1965). In addition to a specimen in the Buffalo Museum of Science collected at Niagara Falls with no date given, they list 1) a specimen collected in a cedar swamp in March of 1937, three miles west of Chili; 2) a sight record of February 6, 1948 at Churchville; and 3) an April 9, 1950 sighting in Dunkirk Harbor.

Bull (*op. cit.*), lists two records and mentions several unconfirmed sightings. One bird was shot on Long Island with the date and the specimen's whereabouts unknown. The other was collected on December 29, 1902 at Orient, but was not preserved.

A search through *Audubon Field Notes* for the years 1965-70 revealed no New York State records, despite two "invasions" of the species. Robbins (AFN, 20 (3): 396-9, 1966) called the 1965-66 influx of the species "perhaps its first real influx in ornithological annals in North America." In that winter there were 37 records from Minnesota, 30 from Ontario, 14 from Quebec, two from Wisconsin, one from Alberta and one from Oregon. He summarizes the reports of 1960-65 and indicates that they averaged two per year. For 1960-65, there were no New York records indicated either.

A lesser invasion occurred in 1968-9 in the western Great Lakes region. Plunkett (AFN, 23 (3): 440-6, 1969) summarized the invasion which in Minnesota was at least as heavy as the one of 1965-6. Eastern reports included one sighting from New Hampshire, one from Quebec and seven from Ontario.

From the data at hand, it would appear that this winter's sighting at Halfmoon is the 26th reported sighting in the state.

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