

## SHORT-EARED OWL FOOD ITEMS IN WINTER

MARTIN BORKO

The Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) is a nearly cosmopolitan species, occurring on every continent except Australia. Throughout its range it is a bird "preferring open plains, marshes, and sand dunes to thick forests" (C. W. Townsend in Bent, 1938). Godfrey (1966) states that it is a bird "inhabiting open spaces" (not a woodland owl). Bull (1974) states that "marshes, meadows, old fields, refuse dumps, airports, and similar terrain are favored habitats of the largely diurnal Short-eared Owl." Most of my own observations of the species have been made in open areas, usually in early successional fields.

In describing maximum concentrations in inland New York, Bull calls attention to the 40 birds that spent most of February 1969 at the Galesville airport in Ulster County. This site is regularly used by wintering Short-eared Owls, as well as by Rough-legged, Red-tailed, and Marsh Hawks.

During the winter of 1974-1975, 69 owl pellets were collected (39 in January and 30 in March). The pellets were measured and examined for food items. They were collected below Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), some singly, but usually in groups of two to four, somewhere at the base of the tree. The most productive spots were raised mounds of dirt and debris with downed sections of old telephone poles. The mounds were only two to four feet above the general grade, but did provide an unobstructed view in all directions.

All pellets contained only the remains of the Meadow Vole (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) except for one that also contained the remains of a young rabbit. Twenty-seven pellets, having a single complete skull and at least eight major long bones, averaged 49.19 mm. by 24.07 mm.; five pellets, containing two skulls and other bones, averaged 68.80 mm. by 26.60 mm. Bull (*l.c.*) states that "if rodents (especially *Microtus*) appear in large numbers these owls are often in evidence and remain as long as this food supply is plentiful." During the winter of 1975-1976, the owls were present until a deep snow made *Microtus* unavailable; following this the owls were not to be found at Galesville.

The section on the food of the Short-eared Owl in Bent's Life Histories (1938) reports on stomach contents and pellet analysis. A staple summer item appears to be insects. In addition to the Meadow

Vole, the following have been reported as food items: White-footed, Pine, and House Mice, Red-winged Blackbirds, juncos, Vesper Sparrows, American Robins, meadowlarks, Snow Buntings, Savannah Sparrows and Water Pipits. Bent also mentions William Brewster's finding of a colony of Short-eared Owls preying upon nesting terns.

The analysis closest to the one reported here was made near Savannah, Georgia, by Ivan R. Tomkins and reported in Bent (1938): "The 50 pellets collected during January and February contained the remains of 34 birds, of 14 identifiable species, and 54 mammals, of two or more species. The 18 pellets collected in the same places during late February and March contained remains of 4 birds and 45 house mice."

The Short-eared Owl appears plastic and opportunistic in its feeding habits. If anyone can supply the author with pellets collected from Short-eared Owls or other positively identified owls in New York State, it would be most appreciated. Please give details as to site and date of collection. There is much to learn about the Short-eared Owl and its habits in New York State.

#### REFERENCES

- Bent, Arthur Cleveland. 1938. Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey (Part 2). *United States National Museum Bulletin* 170.
- Bull, John. 1974. *Birds of New York State*. Doubleday/Natural History Press, Garden City, N.Y.
- Godfrey, W. Earl. 1966. *The Birds of Canada*. National Museums of Canada, Bulletin No. 203, Biological Series No. 73.

*Orange County Community College,  
115 South Street, Middletown, New York 10940*