

BEHAVIOR AND OCCURRENCE OF THE HAWK-OWL IN NORTHERN NEW YORK

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A Hawk-Owl (*Surnia ulula*) was observed at Upper and Lower Lakes Wildlife Management Area in the Town of Canton, St. Lawrence County, between 6 January and 15 March 1982. This appears to be the second record of the species from St. Lawrence County since 1962 and extends the extreme dates for this region. There are two previous records for St. Lawrence County since 1950: Potsdam, 20 December 1962 (Peakall 1969), and Massena, December 1973-27 February 1974.

Bull (1974) reports "scarcely three dozen reliable reports" for the state and cites extreme dates of 24 October to 16 March. Peakall (1969) reviews records for the Hawk-Owl in New York State and lists sightings since 1950. Gordon (1965) reviews reports for Region 6. Between 1950 and 1969 there were three reports from Jefferson County and one each from Lewis and St. Lawrence Counties. Three of the six sightings occurred the winter of 1962-63. Beehler (1979) cites two sightings from Franklin County in 1962, omitted by Peakall (1969). This past winter a Hawk-Owl was reported by Bernard Carman in Keene, Essex County, on 9 February 1982. The bird, observed by many persons, was last seen 20 March, six days later than the last date previously reported for New York State (*High Peaks Audubon Newsletter*, 10: 26). The only sighting for Essex County prior to this, from Keene in 1979, is not cited by Carleton (1980). No records are given for Clinton County (Warren 1979), or Oswego County (Smith and Ryan 1978). I suspect the species is frequently overlooked in northern New York. The species is equally rare in southern Ontario; Quilliam (1973) states that none had been reported since 1964. Previous to that, eight birds had been seen between 20 November 1962 and 17 February 1963, the only previous records being from 1926 and 1906.

Hawk-Owl sightings reported in *The Kingbird* and by Bull (1974) since 1969 are:

- 1 Dec. 1973-27 Feb. 1974. Massena, St. Lawrence Co. (XXIV (2): 85).
- 15 Dec. 1974-15 March 1975. Vernon, Oneida Co. (XXV (2): 103; Bull, 1976).

20 Dec. 1974. North Gage, Oneida Co. (XXV (2): 103).
3 Dec. 1978. Keene, Essex Co. (XXIX (2): 106).
18 Feb. 1978. Ithaca, Cayuga Co. (XXVII (2): 109).
6, 14 Feb. 1980. Greece, Monroe Co. (XXX (2): 108).
6 Jan-15 March 1982, Canton, St. Lawrence Co. (XXXII (2): 126).
4 Feb. 1982. Limerick-Chaumont, Jefferson Co. (Unpubl.)
9 Feb.-20 March 1982. Keene, Essex Co. (XXXII (2): 129).

The 1978 Keene sighting was unconfirmed, as was the 1982 Chaumont sighting reported by Lee Chamberlaine. In addition, I received an unconfirmed report of a sighting near Tupper Lake, Franklin County, during the winter of 1980-81.

The 1982 bird was first identified by Harold Gerbis of St. Lawrence University, who was accompanied by David Hamelin, Wildlife Technician, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. It was then observed frequently throughout the period by myself, James Winterbottom, Supervisor at the management area, and visiting birders. I last saw the Hawk-Owl on 26 February 1982. During the first three weeks it spent most of its time perched conspicuously in trees along Route 68. Its most frequent perch was at a height of about 45 ft. on the broken branches of a dead elm about 25 ft. from the road. (This tree and adjacent ones were cut by a road crew 3 March.) Other perches in the vicinity ranged from 15 to 50 ft. in height and were located in Black Willow, Big-toothed Aspen and American Ash. Twice the bird was observed perched low (15 ft.) in a brush field, obviously hunting.

The bird exhibited behavior generally described as characteristic of the species—rapid low flight with strong wingbeats, rising abruptly to the perch. While perched it rapidly rotated its head in all directions. Twice the Hawk-Owl was mobbed by other species. On 13 January a flock of five Pine Grosbeaks briefly “buzzed” it; on 5 February it was briefly mobbed by 5-7 crows, which subsequently departed.

It was observed to eject a pellet on 22 January, and several pellets were subsequently collected. Ovoid in shape, four pellets averaged 16.8 mm x 20 mm x 40 mm in size. Those that were in poor condition were dissected, yielding remains of three Meadow Voles (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*), one Short-tailed Shrew (*Blarina brevicauda*), one lagomorph incisor, and one White-footed Mouse (*Peromyscus leucopus*). Under the perch, entrails of mouse and/or rabbit were collected. On one occasion J. Spivack and D. Hunt observed it plucking

a small bird and J. Winterbottom saw it kill a Snowshoe Hare (*Lepus americanus*).

The following comments were made in *High Peaks Audubon Newsletter* (10 (3): 15-17, 1982) with regard to feeding by a Hawk-Owl observed in 1962 in Keene: "Various observers reported seeing the Hawk-Owl drop down from his perch to capture prey that included shrews, voles, meadow mice, deer mice, and red squirrels. The only avian prey reported was a Pine Grosbeak that was eaten on the spot, but most of the mammal prey was cached in the top of nearby broken elm stubs. Food seemed abundant. Greenie Chase thinks, 'Lucky the Hawk-Owl chose a sedge-goldenrod rich meadow vole community—with shrews to spook the voles to the surface.' "

On 26 February 1982 J. Winterbottom observed a second "buffy-colored" individual although the identification was not confirmed. I checked the area on 3, 4 and 6 March, and did not see the Hawk-Owl, but did see a Rough-legged Hawk on those days. Winterbottom observed the two birds hovering and flying together near the Grasse River. He last reported a single individual on 15 March. Other arctic and boreal visitors frequently seen in the immediate area were two Northern Shrikes, several Rough-legged Hawks, and one Snowy Owl. A Barred Owl was found dead on the road 20 February.

The Hawk-Owl is the only invading winter raptor from the eastern boreal coniferous forest or taiga. The Boreal and Great Gray Owls have a more westerly distribution and the Snowy Owl and Rough-legged Hawk breed farther north in open woodlands and tundra. The distribution of the Northern Shrike is similar to that of the Hawk-Owl. The last major invasion of Hawk-Owls was in the winter of 1962-63. Several Hawk-Owls were also reported this winter from Maine and southeastern Ontario, and one each from New Hampshire and eastern New Brunswick (unpublished reports). In addition, there were heavy influxes of Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Shrikes and above average numbers of Snowy Owls, all suggestive of low prey abundance in the Arctic.

As I recorded its behavior, I pondered why, with 8000 acres of Wildlife Management Area and hundreds of square miles of rural landscape, did it select this area along the road? With tens of miles of side roads, why did it choose to locate along a state highway? Certainly the set of perches was necessary, but by no means unique to that location. During its stay here the owl provided interest to persons as far as southern New York State and Montreal, Quebec.

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