HIGHWAY OBSERVATIONS OF GREAT HORNED OWLS IN NEW YORK STATE

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This note describes five different instances of Great Horned Owls *(Bubo virgianus)* perching near highways. We consider these observations significant for the following reasons: 1) no detailed discussion of this topic could be found in the literature; 2) there is a need to alert others of this potential source for studying or censusing Great Horned Owl populations.

Aware of the emergence of most owls at dusk, the authors carefully observed the rural roadside habitat while driving along Interstate 81 and the New York State Thruway on two recent trips to Canada (June 1982, August 1983). We purposely watched conspicuous perches during the last hour of daylight while maintaining an average speed of about 90 km/hr. Given the large bulky silhouette of the horned owl, such sightings were not difficult at this speed and could also be made under low light conditions.

A total of three Great Horned Owls was observed along highways at dusk during approximately 90 km of optimum viewing mileage (the last half hour of daylight on two evenings). Two were perched in large dead trees on the edge of shelter belts that overlooked large agricultural fields (Watertown, Buffalo). The other was observed on a dead snag in a small roadside swamp with many dead poles (Thousand Islands Bridge). On an earlier trip to the Lake George region (July 1981), the first author had noted a Great Horned Owl perched in a dead treetop in woodland habitat at dawn (Albany). Thus far we have only established one diurnal record, that of a Great Horned Owl perched in a roadside swamp at 1420 hours (Duluth, Minn.). This bird was observed perch-hunting from a dead tree in a small swamp containing many dead trees of sapling and pole size.

The fact that wintering Red-tailed Hawks *(Buteo jamaicensis)* perch and hunt along highways is well known and documented. Of interest, Bart (1977) has shown that the distribution of voles *(Microtus)* is a major factor determining the distribution of roadside Red-tailed Hawks in central New York. Whether the Great Horned Owls we observed were in some way associated with the presence of the highway remains to be determined. Nevertheless, two of five owl sightings were in deadwood swamps where the highway edge did not seem to be utilized or beneficial. The other three sightings however, were identical to perches typically used by the edge-favoring Red-tailed Hawk. In fact, two of

these owls were perched remarkably close to the shoulder of the road (10-20 m). These owls appeared to be well habituated to the continuous passage of speeding automobiles. Similarly, Bull (1964: 271) stated that the Great Horned Owl "has in recent years become more adapted to the metropolitan area." In any event, further study will be required to determine if the occurrence of Great Horned Owls along highways is merely an expected result from covering much good habitat or a reponse to higher prey abundance.

LITERATURE CITED

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