

ADDITIONAL SPECIMENS OF THE SUBARCTIC GREAT HORNED OWL FROM NEW YORK

ROBERT W. DICKERMAN

Recently (Dickerman 1991a) I verified the record of a winter specimen of the subarctic nesting population of the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus subarcticus*) in New York State. I here report three more specimens.

In fortuitous sequence, during August 1991, I visited the National Museum of Canada in Ottawa, and then Cornell University. In Ottawa, in a single day, I was able to examine a series of over 60 nesting season specimens of *subarcticus*. I laid out in one continuous series 25 specimens ranging from western Ontario to Alberta. These were selected for comparability of plumage. This was an amazingly uniform series; the westernmost specimen fit into the easternmost end of the series and vice versa! The very few specimens that did not fit were all paler, even when allowances were made for freshness of the plumage. I believe that those few represented late spring or early fall migrants of the pale extreme from the northernmost nesting areas, which become suitable for nesting later in the spring or are subject to the early onset of severe conditions in some years. Some ornithologists, who have a distorted concept of the taxon, apparently consider these extremely pale birds as being typical of *subarcticus*. Unfortunately, the type specimen of *subarcticus* is a winter migrant from Racine, Wisconsin, and, thus, cannot be associated with a known nesting area from within the subboreal nesting range of this taxon.

Thus, when I visited the collection at Cornell University two weeks later, I had a good concept of the variation within *subarcticus*. As I went through the collection of Great Horned Owl from New York, I encountered three birds with white feet. The feet of these three birds lacked barring. The eastern, or nominate, subspecies, *B. v. virginianus*, only occasionally has white feet. They may be buffy, but more commonly they are deep ochraceous, and usually are moderately to heavily barred with black. Next I compared these three birds with nesting season specimens from New York. The latter, taken later in the year, should have been more worn and faded, but were in fact much, much darker, and had heavily barred feet.

Then I turned to the tray labeled *occidentalis*. As I have explained earlier (1991b), that name was based on a migrant *subarcticus*. As expected, all specimens of "*occidentalis*" from Minnesota were good *subarcticus* (see Houston 1978), and the three New York specimens were inseparable from

them. Indeed, a nesting specimen from Churchill, Manitoba, was slightly darker than the three New York specimens. These Tompkins County specimens are:

CU 3561	Trumbull Corners	28 November 1933
3562	Trumbull Corners	5 December 1933
22226	Waterburg	26 October 1949

A fourth specimen (37139) from 14 kilometers WNW of Utica, 3 November 1950, is paler than nesting season *virginianus*, but far too ochraceous for *subarcticus*. I believe it migrated from an area of intergradation, for example from central Ontario.

DISCUSSION

During the course of writing this note, I prepared a specimen of an eastern bird with medium buffy, lightly barred feet. I believe it is a bird of the year. However, at the moment I know of no plumage character that will separate first year from older birds after they have completed the fall molt, and to date no one has suggested that second year and older birds may have more pigmented or more heavily barred feet. However, I think it a very good possibility. Thus, it might be important to segregate first year birds in making comparisons, especially among the western and northern pale populations.

Now that it is recognized that at least some individuals (and probably some populations) of Great Horned Owl are partly migratory, occasionally over long distances (Houston 1978, Dickerman unpubl. ms.), specimens that do not match known locally nesting birds should be reevaluated. I expect many more northern migrants will be found in series that have been complacently recognized until now as nominate *virginianus*.

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American Museum of Natural History, 79th Street at Central Park West, New York, New York, 10024.

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