

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS



Figure 1. Vinaceous Morph Barn Owl at Pelham Bay Park. Photograph by Ellen Valle.

Wintering Vineaceous (Dark) Morph Barn Owl: The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) is the third most common breeding owl in the New York City-Long Island region (Region 10). During the breeding season, it frequents and nests in abandoned buildings, old hollowed out trees and in salt marshes. During the winter months the Barn Owl commonly can be found in dense evergreen stands, vine entangled areas and abandoned or seasonal buildings in parks and residential areas. It is a year round resident at

Pelham Bay Park in The Bronx, New York City, where it has been recorded breeding in every season. During December 1991, a dark morph Barn Owl was discovered roosting in large evergreens behind the Pell Mansion. This dark morph is described by Johnsgard (1988. *North American Owls; Biology and Natural History*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C.) as the vineaceous, ochraceous or orange-breasted phase. A description of this bird is:

The ventral side (underwing, chest, belly and throat) was rich orange-tan mottled with dusky spots. The face was a rich russet-wine color. The border of the facial disk formed an extremely dark brown ring. The dorsal side of the bird was rich brown on the back. The scapulars, tertials, primaries, and secondaries were almost completely gray, peppered with white spots.

Its sex could not be determined. Even though females sometimes are darker than males, even under normal circumstances plumage is an unreliable indicator of a Barn Owl's gender. This vineaceous Barn Owl was not seen after late March 1992. However, the following winter a dark Barn Owl was seen at Pelham Bay Park. This bird was not as dark as its predecessor. Did the vineaceous bird stay in the park and raise young, passing on the melanistic traits? Perhaps. However, in all the years I have been studying the Barn Owl, I have never seen, or heard of anyone seeing, one as dark as the individual reported here.

The Barn Owl is a cosmopolitan species with 47 races worldwide. The continental North American race, *T. a. pratincola*, is extremely variable in color but leucistic or melanistic extremes are quite rare and are not associated with geography or climate as in many other raptors (J. DeLatorre, pers. comm.). *T. a. pratincola*'s northern range limit extends from southern British Columbia in the west, east to extreme northeastern New York State, and along the coast to Massachusetts. The southern boundary is in eastern Guatemala. One of the darkest races, *T. a. guttata*, inhabits Scandinavia and western Russia and is very close in coloration to the individual here described from Pelham Bay Park. I do not suggest that this Barn Owl made a transatlantic flight, but ship assisted transport is not an impossibility. One of the busiest ports in the world is just a few miles away.

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