

CACHING OF PREY BY NORTHERN HAWK OWL

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On 8 Mar 2003 I drove 659 miles from Cincinnati, Ohio just to see the spectacular Northern Hawk Owl in Montgomery County, Town of Root. Sounds like a long trip, you say? Any day spent at close range with a Northern Hawk Owl is a special day, justifying a long trip. This observation on 8 Mar 2003 was an extra special one. The last time I saw Northern Hawk Owl was a long-time ago in 1991 along Route 5 halfway between Chittenango and Canastota (Region 5), while I was living in Norwich, NY (Region 4). Although I live out of state, I'm still a member of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, and am interested in New York birds. After a whole winter (2002-2003) of severe winter of 2002-2003 weather on weekends that eliminated any long-distance attempt to see this bird, good weather prevailed on Saturday, 8 Mar, as predicted.

I arrived at the Corbin Hill Road location in the Town of Root at about 5:00 pm. The sun was getting low in the sky and the beginnings of a high thin cloud cover indicated a weather change, but there was still enough good light for observation. The owl was on location at the top of the maple trees in front of the farmhouse at the top of the hill surveying its territory, swiveling its head from side to side as is typical when hunting. As I watched from the road edge, the owl flew down to a lower perch, pulled out some prey from its cache, which was in dead hollow branch, and proceeded to eat. From my roadside view, the prey looked like a rodent, as I could see a long thin tail dangling below the owl's perch. I walked up the road and into the driveway to get the light at my back for a better view. As I watched from the new location the bird took another bite of the headless dead rat. After a few minutes, the owl flew to the hollow dead branch returning the rat to its cache, and then flew up to the treetop to continue scanning and surveying the area.

The eating behavior observed for this Hawk Owl is consistent with that reported in the literature. Northern Hawk Owl is known to be "a less ravenous eater than most owls, (and) it does not swallow whole any prey larger than a mouse. Bigger prey is eaten piecemeal much in the manner of a hawk eating its prey." (Eckert & Karalus 1987)

Caching of prey is known for several species of raptors and has been previously reported for Northern Hawk Owl in New York. "Caching of the parts of the remains of uneaten prey is a well-known habit of the American Kestrel, and has also been reported for the peregrine, goshawk and several owls. (Brown & Amadon 1968) A No. Hawk Owl in 1962 in Keene was observed caching mammalian prey. "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 mammalian prey was cached in the top of nearby broken elm stubs." (Crowell 1982)

It is not surprising that the Root Northern Hawk Owl cached prey. In early March during my visit, approximately two to three feet of packed snow still covered the area, the remnant of at least six feet of snow that fell throughout the winter. Severe weather conditions, high wind and blowing snow, reported on bird listserves on the internet throughout the winter forced this bird to change its habits and move from this high perch. Perhaps this may have made hunting conditions difficult at times.

I stayed with this bird for another 45 minutes, just enjoying it, but left at about 5:50 pm. Wish I could have arrived sooner and stayed longer! What a great bird! I've seen Northern Hawk Owl at least four times in the past 30+ years, and each time is special. Three of those times required very long distance trips, luck and the favor of the good weather gods as did this one. I do feel privileged to have succeeded in this long distance adventure and sharing some time with this magnificent, impressive bird.

Literature Cited

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