

BOREAL OWL IN CENTRAL PARK, NEW YORK COUNTY

Peter W. Post

141 West 73rd Street, New York, NY 10023

pwpost@nyc.rr.com

Abstract A Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*) was discovered by James Demes in Central Park during the Lower Hudson Valley Christmas Bird Count on 19 December 2004. The Boreal Owl was seen daily in the vicinity of the Tavern on the Green restaurant from 19 December through 13 January, except for three non-consecutive days when it could not be found. Seen by more than a thousand people and copiously documented, this represents just the second record for this species from Region 10 (New York City and Long Island).

At the Central Park Christmas Bird Count (CBC), which is a part of the Lower Hudson Valley CBC, held on 19 December 2004, no one wanted to bird the southwest section because it is the most built-up and least productive. No one ever sees any good birds there. Nonetheless, James Demes volunteered to bird that section. At the luncheon tally, Jim reported that he had seen a Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*). He said the bird was fairly well exposed and about 10 feet above the ground in a small Eastern Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) at the Tavern on the Green restaurant. After lunch, anxious to see if the bird was photographable, I returned to the site with Jim and several other birders.

We found the bird facing away, hunched up and huddled against the hemlock's main trunk. The first thing I noticed was the large head and overall size, which told me it was not a Saw-whet Owl. But what was it? Several minutes later, after getting a look at the horn colored bill, black border of the facial discs, and fine white spots on the forehead I realized that it was a Boreal Owl (*A. funereus*)! One of the most sought-after of New York State's owls. A birder's dream.

I immediately called Lloyd Spitalnik, one of the CBC participants, via a borrowed cell phone, and told him to get your @*#\$ over here right away. Lloyd, a Central Park regular is also owner of Metro Birding Briefs (aka MetroBirds), a Yahoo Group devoted to the reporting of rare birds in the New York City Metropolitan Area. He was almost home when he received my phone call. Luckily the person driving him home understood the urgency of the situation and drove him back to the park. Fearing that the bird might prove to be a one-day wonder, Lloyd called as many of the active Central Park birders as he could reach. Some 20 birders got to see/photograph the bird before nightfall. That evening Lloyd posted directions to the owl on MetroBirds. The next morning the Boreal Owl was relocated perched in the open about 20 feet above the ground in a Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*) (Fig. 1) about 250 feet from the hemlock where it was seen the day before. It moved every few days between these two trees and an ornamental holly (*Ilex* sp.). One day it perched on grape vines (*Vitis* sp.) on the side of the restaurant. The latter two locations are within a few yards of the hemlock in which the bird was originally found. The only time it was not seen in



Figure 1. Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*), Central Park, New York City.
20 December 2004, Lloyd Spitalnik.

the immediate vicinity of the Tavern on the Green, it appeared about a quarter of a mile away in an Austrian Pine (*Pinus nigra*). The Boreal Owl was seen daily from 19 December though 13 January, except for three non-consecutive days when it could not be found.

Judging from its relatively large size, the bird appeared to be a female, which is consistent with the fact that females rather than males tend to wander (Cheveau *et al.* 2004). During its stay the Boreal Owl was seen eating a young Norway Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) and was reported to have been seen hunting young rats around the restaurant at night. The pellets that were recovered contain rodent remains that have yet to be identified. However, the only other small rodent species known to occur in Central Park are House Mouse (*Mus musculus*) and White-footed Mouse (*Peromyscus leucopus*).

During the entire time the Boreal Owl was present, either Lloyd, myself, or both of us, spent considerable time monitoring the bird. People were generally well behaved and there was only one known incident of someone who jumped the fence that surrounded the spruce tree to get a better look. We estimate that between 1,000 and 1,500 people saw the owl, due in no small part to Lloyd's maintaining MetroBirds and answering numerous phone calls and e-mails asking if the bird was still present, thus making this bird the most viewed Boreal Owl in New York State's history. To our knowledge, the farthest anyone traveled to see the owl was a gentleman from California who used his relatives in New York as an excuse to see the bird.

Other New York State Records

A very rare vagrant to New York State (D Anna 1998), the Boreal Owl is especially rare in the southeastern part of the state. There are only two previous verified records from the New York City area (including northern New Jersey), both specimens: one struck a building at the Raritan Arsenal, near Bonhamtown, Middlesex County, NJ on 1 November 1962 (Bull 1964); and one was found dead at Cedar Beach, Suffolk County, Long Island on 15 January 1975 (Feustel 1975). A 12 February 1951 record from Croton Point, Westchester Co., observed for one hour at fifty feet by John Mayer and George Rose was rejected by Bull (1964, 1974) on the basis that no one else was informed about it until too late and thus no confirmation was possible. Unfortunately, although Mayer was well known for his superior birding skills, both he and Rose were loners who seldom reported the birds they saw, although they were responsible for some major finds that were later verified by others. These are among the southernmost known occurrences of the Boreal Owl in the northeastern United States.

There are more than two dozen Boreal Owl records from New York State, including several specimens and photographed individuals. Most records are from the Adirondacks and vicinity and the Lake Ontario Plain in Monroe and Oswego counties (Yunick 1979, D Anna 1998). At least four other Boreal Owls, besides the one in Central Park, were reported from New York State during the winter of 2004/05. The first of these was a bird found by Brett Ewald on the 18 December Wilson Lake Plains CBC at Wilson-Tuscarawas State Park, Niagara County. Seen by many observers it could not be found the following day (Mike Morgante,

Willie D Anna, *via e-mail*). A second bird found by Marg Partridge on her property in the town of Wilson, Niagara County, on 23 January stayed until nearly mid-March (Mike Morgante, Willie D Anna, *via e-mail*). Although the latter two locations are about three miles apart it is believed that these were not the same bird (D Anna, *via e-mail*). David Tetlow found another Boreal Owl on 30 December at the Braddock Bay Wildlife Management Area, Monroe County. Subsequently seen by a number of other observers it only stayed through the following day (Kevin Griffith, *via e-mail*). A Boreal Owl heard a few nights later very near where this bird had been seen was probably the same individual (Willie D Anna, *via e-mail*). A fourth Boreal Owl was found stunned on a patio in the village of Hilto, Town of Parma, Monroe County and reportedly photographed, but no other details are currently available (Kevin Griffith, *via e-mail*).

Southward Irruptions of Northern Owls

The largest documented irruption of Great Gray Owls (*Strix nebulosa*), Northern Hawk Owls (*Surnia ulula*), and Boreal Owls ever recorded took place in the mid-West this past winter. More than 400 Boreal Owls were recorded in Minnesota as of 21 February 2005 compared to only one recorded the pervious winter (Alt 2005). The full extent of this invasion in eastern Canada and the northeastern U.S. has yet to be assessed.

Cheveau *et al.* (2004) showed that Boreal Owls periodically irrupt southward at 4-year intervals that are significantly correlated with low population densities of Red-backed Voles (*Clethrionomys gapperi*), their main food source. Although southward incursions of Great Gray and Northern Hawk Owls are correlated with those of Boreal Owls, the irruptions of the former two species are neither as strong nor as regular as are those of Boreal Owls. Cheveau *et al.* (2004) hypothesize that this is due to the larger size of Great Gray and Northern Hawk Owls, which allows them to access a wider size range of prey species than Boreal Owls, and to these owls preference for open habitats in which population fluctuations of small mammals are less extreme than those of Red-backed Voles.

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