

Articles

Northern Owls in Sudbury and Manitoulin Districts: High Numbers, Out of Season Occurrences and Breeding

Charles J. Whitelaw

Introduction

This article reviews the status of the Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*), the Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) and the Northern Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*) in the Sudbury and Manitoulin districts of Ontario. Past records of the Sudbury Ornithological Society and the Manitoulin Nature Club have been searched (Nicholson 1970-1994, Lemon 1994-1997). Available records go back as far as 1967, a period of 30 years.

Great Gray Owl

During the 1970s and throughout most of the 1980s, the Great Gray Owl has been an irregular and uncommon winter visitor, with most appearances during the period of December to March. In some years, they have not shown up at all.

Recent Visitations

During the winter of 1991-92, Great Grays showed up in rather large numbers. The first arrivals were seen by early December 1991. By January 1992, sightings became rather frequent in both Sudbury

and Manitoulin districts. As many as five or six birds could frequently be seen on a given day in the Sudbury Region, many within the city itself. The peak was reached by early February, when as many as 25 were found on a single day on Manitoulin Island. Toward the latter part of February, a storm brought freezing rain which soon covered the country with ice. Before long, there was evidence of widespread starvation among the population of visiting Great Gray Owls. Dead birds were picked up in a number of locations, and many were shot by the ill-informed (Rodney Campbell, pers. comm.).

During the winter of 1993-94, an invasion occurred which followed much the same pattern as two years earlier. Numbers matched those of the earlier invasion, particularly on Manitoulin Island.

Out of Season Occurrences

The Great Gray Owl normally breeds far to the north of Sudbury and Manitoulin districts (Peck and

James 1983). However, there has been recent breeding in Algonquin Provincial Park (Forbes et al. 1992), and as well, there is a very old (1911) breeding record from Chisolm Township, Nipissing District (James 1991).

More recently, in late April and early May of 1997, a single adult bird was seen several times in Tehkummah Township, Manitoulin Island (Don Ferguson, pers. comm.). The mate of this bird, if one was in the area, was not located. During February 1997, as many as six Great Gray Owls were found in a single day on Barrie Island, Manitoulin. Late into the spring (June), individual birds were seen on occasion on the north side of Barrie Island. During July, two birds were seen together in the same general area. A juvenile Great Gray Owl (still with down feathers) was photographed in mid August at 45° 56' 12" north latitude on Barrie Island, by Camille Campbell. On 15 September 1997, three birds were seen together at this location, two of which were believed to be young of the year. These particular birds showed some down feathers, were generally quite dark with no white crescent at the chin, and had shorter tails than an adult bird normally has. On 17 September, two were seen, one of which was a juvenile. On 21 September, one adult was seen. Local nesting was strongly suspected.

Northern Hawk Owl

As with the Great Gray Owl, the

Northern Hawk Owl has been an irregular and uncommon winter visitor to Manitoulin and the southern Sudbury districts during the 1970s and 1980s. Individuals have generally appeared by mid November and stayed until late December in most cases, after which most have moved on. The odd one has been known to stay for the entire winter, occupying a hunting territory which was established shortly after arrival in November. In the 1990s, the numbers of individuals seen during November has generally increased. At the same time, the regularity of overwintering birds during these years has also increased.

High Numbers

The winter of 1996-97 saw Northern Hawk Owls overwinter on Barrie Island, Manitoulin in unprecedented numbers. Barrie Island is a township joined to mainland Manitoulin by a short causeway. It is strictly a rural farming community. Road access during the winter months is limited to an area of about ten square kilometres, yet during January and February of 1997, as many as 11 Northern Hawk Owls were tallied in this area on a single day. The high numbers appeared to be due to an extremely high vole (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) population. This particular invasion did lead to a confirmed nesting.

Out of Season Occurrences

At least two pairs of Northern

Hawk Owls nested and raised families during 1997 on Barrie Island, Manitoulin (Campbell et al. 1998). In both cases, family groups were seen together on their home territory after the young were fledged in the month of June.

In Sudbury District, there are records of two cases where an individual bird, and possibly a mated pair, spent the summer on a territory. In neither case was there any evidence of successful nesting. The first of these occurred near the community of Whitefish, just west of the city of Sudbury, where a single bird was seen regularly throughout the summer of 1996, from 14 June until 1 October (Igor Konikow, pers. comm.). The second summer occurrence of the Northern Hawk Owl in the southern part of the Sudbury District was on the former Burwash Industrial Farm property, south of the city. One bird occupied a territory beginning in December 1996. This bird, and occasionally two, were seen here throughout the winter and into the following spring (Heather Baines, pers. comm.). On 1 June 1997, the Sudbury Ornithological Society had a field outing to the Burwash property. One of the Northern Hawk Owls cooperated and was seen by most members present that day. One or sometimes two birds were seen on occasion during the summer. The last sighting was on 24 September 1997. There was no evidence of nesting. The Burwash site is currently used

by the Militia of the Canadian Army for training exercises. Access to the property by birdwatchers is not always available, although entry is generally possible on weekends.

Snowy Owl

Of the three species dealt with in this report, the Snowy Owl has possibly been the most consistent as a winter visitor. Again, the Snowy Owl has generally shown up in November, with most birds moving on farther south, but occasionally the odd one has overwintered. The one exception to this pattern was in the winter of 1971-72, when as many as 33 Snowies were believed to have overwintered in and around the city of Sudbury (Young 1973).

Out of Season Occurrences

During the winter of 1996-97, when large numbers of Great Gray Owls and Northern Hawk Owls overwintered on Barrie Island, Manitoulin, there were two Snowy Owls also present. At least one of these, believed to be an adult male, stayed throughout the following spring and summer on Barrie Island. Unfortunately, it was found dead on 1 September 1997. A second Snowy Owl also spent at least part of the summer of 1997 in nearby Gordon Township (Doreen Bailey, pers. comm.). This particular bird was believed to be an adult female, or possibly an immature bird, as it was very heavily marked. This recent occurrence of Snowy Owls during

the summer in Ontario appears to be unusual (James 1991); however, the species has been observed during summer in the settled parts of eastern North America in the past (Bent 1938).

Conclusion

In summary, there is some evidence that the numbers of invading and overwintering northern owls, and their occurrence during the nesting season, have increased in recent years in Sudbury and Manitoulin districts.

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Charles J. Whitelaw, 4195 Frost Avenue, Hanmer, Ontario P3P 1E3