

Notes

The Ontario Great Gray Owl Irruption of 2004-2005: Additional Records

Colin D. Jones

Following the publication of my article on the Great Gray Owl irruption of 2004-2005 in the December 2005 issue of *Ontario Birds* (Jones 2005), I was contacted by Mike Jacques with additional data from eastern Ontario that was not captured during my compilation for the original article. Although the birding communication network is much better today than in the past, primarily due to e-mail and the internet, it became obvious that I had missed some information sources while preparing the data for the article. With the

permission of the coordinator, I posted a request for information on ONTBIRDS, the bird sightings list-serv maintained by the Ontario Field Ornithologists, asking for any other additional data that affected the content of my original article.

Here, I provide corrections/updates to the data presented in Table 1 (date of the first Great Gray Owl record by area) and Table 2 (date of the last Great Gray Owl record by area) of my original article. I also provide some additional records of birds that lingered into the spring/summer of 2005.

Updates to Table 1: Date of first Great Gray Owl record by area during the irruption of 2004-2005. The source of each record is indicated within brackets following the date.

AREA	DATE OF FIRST OCCURRENCE
Bruce County	26 December 2004 (<i>fide</i> C. Cartwright)
Frontenac County	18 December 2004 (J. Griffin, <i>fide</i> M. Jacques)
Lanark County	Prior to 23 November 2004 (reported in Carleton Place local newspaper, <i>fide</i> M. Jacques)
Parry Sound District	3 November 2004 (A. Parker, <i>fide</i> M. Parker)
Prescott & Russell County	10 December 2004 (J. Bouvier)
Toronto	13 December 2004 (J. Bartl)

Updates to Table 2: Date of the last Great Gray Owl record by area during the irruption of 2004-2005. The source of each record is indicated within brackets following the date.

AREA	DATE OF LAST OCCURRENCE
Northumberland County	15 April 2005 (K. Appleman, <i>vide</i> C. Goodwin)
Prescott & Russell County	11 April 2005 (G. Cadieux, <i>vide</i> J. Bouvier)
Toronto	20 March 2005 (J. Bartl)

Updates to Lingering Birds

In Nipissing District, G. Boxwell found an individual Great Gray Owl southeast of Bonfield on 31 July 2005 (M. Parker, pers. comm.). Another bird was repeatedly observed along Highway 515 between the villages of Combermere and Palmer Rapids, Renfrew County, during the summer of 2005 until late September (B. Shulist, pers. comm.).

The bird observed on 26 June 2005 in the Crane Lake area, Bruce County (as reported in Jones 2005) is thought to perhaps be a resident as there has been breeding evidence there since 2000 (C. Cartwright, pers. comm.). A pair was present at Cabot Head in April 2001 also (C. Cartwright, pers. comm.), further supporting the pos-

sibility of breeding in Bruce County at least occasionally.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the individuals who provided me with additional data from the 2004-2005 Great Gray Owl irruption in response to my request for information posted on ONTBIRDS. They included: Joe Bartl, Michael Biro, Jacques Bouvier, Lissa Bruce, Cindy Cartwright, Clive Goodwin, Larry Neily, Martin Parker, Langis Sirois, Brian Shulist and Richard Telfer. I especially thank Mike Jacques for making me aware of some data gaps from eastern Ontario, providing me with a very comprehensive summary of records from his area, and for suggesting that an update be written.

Literature Cited

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Herring Gull Takes Sparrow on the Wing

Randy Horvath

When it comes to feeding, gulls are among the most opportunistic of birds. They are quick to seize the moment and exploit every chance for a meal. On 11 October 2004, I witnessed a dramatic example of Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) opportunism at Point Pelee National Park.

Early in the morning, I was at the extreme tip of Point Pelee, along with my brother, Robert Horvath, Marianne Reid, and Adam Pinch. The weather was typical for that time of year, with partly sunny skies, brisk northeasterly winds, and temperature hovering around 10°C. We had not seen anything exceptional, but were reluctant to move on, clinging to the hope that something “good” would turn up.

At approximately 0915h, I observed a small brown bird flapping furiously out over the water about 25 metres off the west beach, just slightly south of us. It appeared to be a sparrow, struggling to return to the safety of the trees. I also sensed that there was something wrong with it. It was clearly battling to keep from falling into the water, as though it were injured or overcome with fatigue.

I alerted my companions, and together we watched the bird, trying to establish its identity. It was some five metres above the water,

passing through a small swirling flock of Herring and Ring-billed (*L. delawarensis*) Gulls. Suddenly, a first winter Herring Gull dived at the bird, narrowly missing it. A second attempt immediately followed, which appeared to wound it in the left wing. The sparrow fell toward the water, but recovered, and continued its desperate flight toward shelter. The Herring Gull attacked again, and missed, but manoeuvred quickly and captured its prey in midair just above the waves. The gull then flew east, across the tip in front of us and out over the lake, with the sparrow clearly visible in its bill, and three or four other Herring Gulls in noisy pursuit.

Gulls are notorious predators of very young birds, of course, but I had never heard or read of a larid attacking a passerine in flight. Indeed, this behaviour was unfamiliar to all of us, and became the subject of much conversation.

Discussion

The unfortunate sparrow was probably a migrant that had left the park during the night en route to its wintering grounds, and then turned back when it realized it could not complete the journey over Lake Erie. It appeared to be exhausted when it finally reached the Point Pelee tip, having flown some dis-

tance directly into the wind. That this bird seemed to be “in trouble” when it first caught my eye may help explain the episode. The Herring Gull may have been attracted by the sparrow’s erratic flight, sensing that it was in a weakened and vulnerable condition.

That evening I began to consult the literature. Bent (1921) recorded no instances of passerines being attacked, killed, or eaten by the Herring Gull, but noted that “all is game that comes in their way” as scavengers of “decaying fish and refuse of all sorts”. It was stated that they rob bird nests of eggs and young, also.

Brinkley and Humann (2001), in *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior*, described gulls in general as “opportunistic omnivores, eating whatever they can find that will satisfy their nutritional needs”. They noted that many of the larger gulls consume the eggs and chicks of other species, and that “they also catch passerines when they can”. Pierrotti and Good (1994), in *The Birds of North America*, described the Herring Gull as a “generalist predator” and “opportunistic scavenger on fish, carrion, [and] human refuse”. They indicated that Herring Gulls breeding on the Great Lakes fed mostly on small fish, but took insects and birds, as well.

Fox et al. (1990) summarized dietary data from 25 Herring Gull colonies located on Lakes Superior, Huron, Erie and Ontario. Bony fish, 80% of which were Alewife (*Alosa pseudoharengus*) and Rainbow Smelt (*Osmerus mordax*), were the main food items on all four lakes, but Herring Gulls ate amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, insects, earthworms and birds, also. Migrating adult birds were seasonally important food items. “Gulls forced migrating passerines onto the surface of the water and seized exhausted individuals which sought refuge on island colonies” (Fox et al. 1990). Indeed, Ring-billed Gulls have been reported to take passerines also, including by capturing them on the wing (Blokpoel and Haymes 1979).

Conclusion

It would seem that passerine predation by Herring Gulls and other large gulls is not rare, even if it is infrequently observed. Weakened or exhausted migrants in exposed conditions over water may be particularly vulnerable.

Acknowledgements

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Plan now to attend the OFO Annual Convention at Ottawa on 30 September and 1 October 2006. Enjoy an exciting weekend of birding, a great dinner with your friends, interesting presentations and displays. Saturday's activities at Capones Banquet Hall in the Nepean Sportsplex include the evening banquet, and an illustrated talk by Guy Morrison of the Canadian Wildlife Service, who is the foremost expert on shorebirds in the Western Hemisphere. Guy has spent many breeding seasons in the arctic and many winters in Central and South America studying shorebirds. His presentation will encompass the arctic breeding grounds, spring and fall migration, staging areas, wintering areas, and conservation. On both Saturday and Sunday, local experts will lead groups of convention participants to several of the very productive fall birding locations in the Ottawa area. The OFO convention weekend is always informative and fun. Don't miss it!

Brewer's Sparrow: First Record for Ontario

John M. Woodcock

On 27 May 2003, a Brewer's Sparrow (*Spizella breweri*) was captured and banded at Thunder Cape Bird Observatory on the northwestern shore of Lake Superior, 25 km east of the city of Thunder Bay, Ontario, as the duck flies. It was a rather quiet day, with only 26 birds of 14 species banded. The weather was calm and mild in the morning but quite windy in the afternoon. Volunteers Maureen Woodcock and Sarah Faegre were looking after the mist-nets (14), hawk nets (8), and heligoland traps (2), making rounds every half hour, extracting birds, and bringing them to the banding lab to be processed. Volunteer Allan Hale, a ringer from England with much experience, was manning the banding lab. Program Coordinator John Woodcock was on the "watch platform" documenting numbers of birds migrating through the station that morning. Maureen and Sarah had just completed checking all the nets and were performing the final task of driving birds, of which there were few, into one of the heligoland traps. Only one bird was captured and Maureen noted upon extracting it from the collecting box that it was a bird with which she was not familiar.

After being alerted, Allan and I proceeded to carefully examine the bird. Our first impression was of a very dull looking, immature

Chipping Sparrow (*S. passerina*). It was too early in the season to be seeing immature birds, however, and this bird had a well-developed cloacal protuberance, typical of an adult male bird in breeding condition. After much consultation with all available texts, we came to the conclusion that what we had in our hands was a Brewer's Sparrow, a species with which neither of us was familiar. However, that morning we had banded two Chipping Sparrows and two Clay-colored Sparrows (*S. pallida*), species with which Brewer's Sparrow can at times be confused.

The Brewer's Sparrow's measurements were: wing, 66 mm; tail, 59 mm; exposed culmen, 8 mm; weight, 12.2 g; CP = 5; and fat = 0. After photographing and banding the bird, it was promptly released. The pale coloration, with little contrast in the head pattern, suggested that this was a bird of the southern subspecies (*S. b. breweri*). I immediately phoned Nick Escott, Chairman of the Thunder Cape Bird Observatory Committee and a recognized expert on bird identification, to report this bird. Nick was able to drop what he was doing to make the trip out to the Cape in the hope of seeing the bird in the vicinity of the observatory. Thunder Cape is somewhat isolated, separated from Thunder Bay by an hour drive and either a 13-km hike



Figure 1: Male Brewer's Sparrow in alternate plumage, captured at Thunder Cape Observatory on 27 May 2003. Photo by *John M. Woodcock*.



Figure 2: Alternate male Brewer's Sparrow, captured at Thunder Cape Observatory on 27 May 2003. Photo by *John M. Woodcock*.

or a half hour boat ride from Silver Islet to Thunder Cape, lake conditions permitting.

In the interim, the bird was observed feeding in a grassy area and then half an hour later was recaptured in a mist-net. It was decided that the bird should be immediately transported to Silver Islet in the Cape's small boat to be inspected by Nick because lake conditions were rapidly deteriorating and it seemed unlikely that Nick would be getting a boat ride out and we were not going to hold onto the bird for the two or so hours it would take Nick to hike out to the Cape. Nick was intercepted before beginning his trek and he concurred with our identification. The Brewer's Sparrow was then released. I had to walk the 13-km back to the Cape due to high waves that developed on Lake Superior and repeat the trek the next day to retrieve the boat. A far superior way of confirming such an identification would be to take digital photos and transmit them immediately via the Internet to all available experts for confirmation. Alas, Thunder Cape Bird Observatory has no land phone lines, no digital phone reception, and

Literature Cited

Crins, W.J. 2004. Ontario Bird Records Committee report for 2003. *Ontario Birds* 22: 54-74.



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This record of Brewer's Sparrow was accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee, and constituted the first occurrence of the species for Ontario (Crins 2004). There have been records of Brewer's Sparrow in southern Manitoba, Illinois, Nova Scotia, Massachusetts, and Minnesota, (AOU 1998).

[AOU] American Ornithologists' Union.
 1998. Check-list of North American Birds. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.

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An Impaled Mourning Dove

Al Sandilands

On 18 December 2004, I noticed a Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) at my feeder south of Cambridge, Ontario, that had a straw at the back of its head. Upon closer examination, it was evident that the straw went all the way through the dove's body.

The straw was typical of grain stubble, and extended approximately 10 cm dorsally and 4 cm ventrally of the bird's body. The straw entered ventrally just ahead of and below the left wing, and exited at the posterior end of the neck at about the midpoint on the bird's right side.

This Mourning Dove was observed on three other occasions. On 22 December, the straw was sticking about 2 cm out of the body ventrally and the straw was unchanged above. By 26 December, the straw was barely visible ventrally, and the dorsal portion was reduced in length to about 7 cm. No changes were noticed when it was last observed on 28 December.

I surmised that the dove had impaled itself while landing in a stubble grain field. The bird appeared

completely unaffected by having a straw through its body. It was one in a flock of about 55 doves that visited the feeders regularly. It showed no discomfort in eating, was equally alert as others in the flock, and I could not see any difference in its flight. During the period that these observations were made, a female Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) caught an average of one dove a day. That the impaled dove survived a minimum of 11 days suggested that it was not more susceptible to predation than others in the flock.

The impaled dove was not observed after 28 December. It may have succumbed to its injuries or suffered from predation. An equally plausible explanation is that the straw eventually broke off so that I could not distinguish it from the rest of the doves. It is highly unlikely that the bird moved elsewhere. Flocks of Mourning Doves remain together all winter and, in rural areas, they use the same fields all winter unless food supplies become depleted (Hennessey and Van Camp 1963, Baskett et al. 1993).

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