

## ABOUT THE COVER: BOREAL OWL

In early November 1983 I received a phone call from an observer stating that he had seen a saw-whet owl roosting in the courtyard of his residence in the crowded confines of Beacon Hill in downtown Boston. At the time this observation excited little interest since both saw-whet and Barred owls were reported almost annually in fall migration from the area. However, this owl remained for a week and was fortuitously, as it turned out, photographed by the observer. Nearly two months later, careful scrutiny of these photographs revealed that the bird was an imposter. The individual was in fact a Boreal Owl, one of the species most assiduously sought by knowledgeable birders.

The fact that this individual's specific identity escaped detection for so long can be easily understood. The Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*) has been almost unrecorded in the state in the past fifty years, whereas the Northern Saw-whet Owl (*A. acadicus*) is of regular occurrence in migration and as a winter visitant, although decidedly uncommon. The general pattern of the two species is similar, differing only in slight variations. The Boreal Owl is about two inches longer, its upperparts are a darker brown, and the streaking on the underparts is less rufous—more of a chocolate brown. The facial pattern of the Boreal Owl is outlined by a distinctive black border and is whiter than the saw-whet's, and the bill is yellow (dark in the saw-whet).

The Boreal Owl has a holarctic distribution, breeding in the boreal forests of both the New World and the Old World, where it is called Tengmalm's Owl. Until recently it was thought that the Boreal Owl in North America bred only in the extensive forests of Canada, but it is now known to breed, at least sporadically, in extreme northern Minnesota and in the Rocky Mountains south to Colorado. Because it lives in an area largely uninhabited by observers, little is known of much about its behavior and movements. Its nest site preference is an abandoned woodpecker nest hole, but it will nest in boxes. The number of eggs laid and young reared are largely determined by the abundance of its preferred prey. A plentitude of small rodents results in greater clutch size and survival of young owls than in years when these prey are scarce. Its call is apparently similar to the Northern Saw-whet's, consisting of a rapid series of hollow *Hooo's*.

In years long past, the Boreal Owl would occasionally occur in New England in minor irruptions in winter. The last and best documented of these incursions happened in the winter of 1922-23. The owls were widely reported in northern New England with a residual effect in southern New England. Many were found around outbuildings in rural areas, and many were noted in a starving or weakened state. Since that time Boreal Owls have chosen to forsake Massachusetts. The most memorable sighting since then was an individual that obligingly perched in a pine tree at the Salisbury State Reservation on

December 31, 1978. A strictly nocturnal bird, the owl was seen by many until dusk fell, then was never seen again. Unfortunate birders who were not present that memorable day can only yearn for the years long ago when this diminutive owl would make at least minor incursions into our area.

Richard A. Forster

### MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

The Boreal Owl on the cover is the work of Paul K. Donahue, who was very generous to *Bird Observer* in 1990, permitting us to use his pictures of Common Redpolls, Black-bellied Plover, and Peregrine Falcon on three covers.

Paul is an acclaimed bird artist who grew up in Winchester and received his training in ornithology at Manomet, in bird-related travel, as a tour guide throughout North America and Ireland and over much of Central and South America, and as a resident naturalist for six seasons at Explorer's Inn in the Tambopata Nature Reserve. He now paints throughout the year, dividing his time between Machias, Maine, and Peru, where he has carried on studies of the canopy birds at Tambopata and at Manu Lodge in Manu National Park, producing a series of paintings of the birds of that habitat. As part of these studies he erected observation platforms (reached by climbing ropes and rope ascenders) as high as a hundred and twenty-five feet above ground. Having hoisted many intrepid Manu visitors to these platforms for close looks at guans, curassows, and monkeys, he now looks forward to erecting a 1.5-kilometer walkway through the treetops to offer people a memorable canopy experience.

Paul has published a number of papers on the distribution and behavior of neotropical birds, but he is perhaps best known for his authoritative depictions of raptors and shorebirds. His work has appeared in *Wilson Bulletin*, *American Birds*, and other publications, and some of his best drawings illustrate the catalogs of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT).

As with the Redpoll cover of the February 1990 issue, we wish to thank the owner of the original drawing, Victor Emanuel, president of VENT, for giving us permission to use Paul's Boreal Owl. We are grateful also to Roberta Hill, art director of VENT, for preparing and sending us a fine copy of the original drawing. Victor Emanuel started VENT sixteen years ago and now offers natural history and birding tours throughout the world. A birder for forty years with a B.A. in zoology and botany and an M.A. in government, Victor has an international reputation as a conservationist. He has assembled a well-trained, conservation-oriented, and very prestigious group of tour leaders—David Bishop, Kim Eckert, Jeff Gordon, Peter Harrison, Steve Hilty, Jeri and Gary Langham, Peter Matthiessen, Ted Parker, Douglas Pratt, Robert Ridgely, Len Robinson, David Wolf, and Kevin Zimmer, to name a few.

Dorothy R. Arvidson