

## Field Notes from Here and There

### COOPERATIVELY HUNTING GREAT HORNED OWLS

*Editor's note: recently a lively discussion sparked by the discovery of several headless Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) took place on MASSBIRD, our regional birding list-server. The identity of the predator(s) responsible for the wave of grouse decapitations was never determined, although Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), various carnivorous mammals, and automotive fan belts were all proposed as the culprit. But the exchange drew forth a wide range of recollections of unusual raptor behavior. One of the most striking of these accounts is reproduced below, lightly edited.*

There are more than birds that like the taste of brains; weasels will take just the head. The brains are nutritious and may fill the dietary needs of some animals. Great Horned Owls, as mentioned in other e-mail messages on the topic, are well known for decapitating.

About thirty years ago, I worked as an undergraduate assistant of Gary Donovan, trapping ducks for banding near Winterport on the Penobscot River in Maine. We had a pair of Great Horned Owls work cooperatively to get at the ducks in the wire trap. We arrived one morning to tend the traps and band the ducks. All twenty-six Black Ducks (*Anas rubripes*) were dead and without heads. That evening we sat in the truck and watched all night. An owl flew in and landed on the top of the trap, panicking the ducks inside. In their attempts to escape, they would stick their heads through the wire cage. The second owl landed on the beach by the trap, waded out, and began to pluck heads off and swallow them.

Having solved the mystery, we disrupted the owls, banded the ducks, and discontinued trapping in that area.

Under an owl nest on Averill's Island, in Topsfield, Massachusetts, I would find rails, moorhens, and ducks all without heads under the tree from the previous night's hunt.

--James MacDougall

### TAG-TEAM SCREECH-OWLS

It has certainly been my experience that the most electrifying wildlife encounters happen when you couldn't possibly expect them. This tale is a case in point.

On December 26, 1997, shortly after 5 p.m., I was driving home from an errand along a major road in my Arlington, Massachusetts, neighborhood. As I

rounded a bend, my headlights just happened to illuminate the last nanosecond in the life of what was probably a Mourning Dove, as it was smacked down onto the pavement by a gray-phase Eastern Screech-Owl! Perhaps in reaction to my squealing brakes, the owl overflowed its inert prey and landed on the nearby sidewalk. But an eye-blink later, a red-phase screech-owl hurtled into the hapless MODO, driving its talons directly into the victim's head and back.

While the gray-phase owl stood watching, the red-phase one glared defiantly into my headlights and repeatedly footed the corpse. After perhaps 90 seconds (during which I doubt I breathed) another car came up the road, so I stepped out to flush the owls clear. The red-phase bird carried its bulky dinner up onto the utility wires like it was a tortilla chip. The gray-phase joined it, and they briefly perched side by side. Then off they flew together into the wilds of the Arlington night.

I returned the next day and found the prey's crop contents on the pavement: corn kernels, millet, and unhulled sunflower seeds. Mainly from this evidence I concluded that the victim was a Mourning Dove. While female Cardinal or Mockingbird also fit the general description of the deceased, I doubt either of these species would have eaten sunflower seeds whole.

Since Eastern Screech-Owls are known to remain paired throughout the year and to jointly defend territories, these two owls were probably mates. Conceivably, they were unmated birds interacting at a territorial boundary, but their behavior after the kill seemed to rule that out. And most sources agree that there is no correlation between color morph and mate preference in Eastern Screech-Owls.

Initially I thought perhaps I had seen an instance of cooperative hunting, but a brief foray into the literature quickly convinced me that screech-owls were much more likely to kill and eat one another than to hunt cooperatively. In fact, I could dredge up no record of cooperative hunting among any owl species. Besides, what use is teamwork to a 6-ounce Terminator that can single-handedly dispatch a Ring-necked Pheasant? Had it been springtime, the gray-phase bird might plausibly have been a parent giving its recently fledged offspring some killing practice, but that seems highly unlikely in winter.

I most probably observed a straightforward case of opportunistic usurpation of prey. In fact, Norm Smith has witnessed similar incidents: having trapped one screech-owl with a lure, he has seen another fly in to relieve its cohort of the would-be meal. No doubt the gray-phase screech-owl was also able to feed on that dove after its mate had eaten its fill. But I think the creature who benefited most from their hunting that night was I!

Thanks to Norm Smith and Simon Perkins of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and Jim Belthoff of Boise State University's Raptor Research Center, for ideas and input.

--Scott Cronenweth