YOUNG BIRDERS

Northern Hawk Owl

Will McCumber

Northern Hawk Owl
Jefferson, NH, December 4, 2000
Photograph by Phil Brown,
Essex, MA

The Mount Washington Regional Airport doesn't look like a place where something exciting might hang out. The expansive fields are whitish brown, a result of last summer's grass poking through a thin layer of snow. A startlingly colored blue airport building looks somehow natural in the frozen landscape, perhaps because I've seen photographs of places like Thule Air Base in Greenland that have a similar look. The domed hanger buildings are clumped together, appearing to huddle from the freezing wind that blows unhindered over the treeless fields. The airport is surrounded by distinctive sharply pointed spruce trees, also evocative of the northern boreal forest.

Standing here on a bright cloudless day, the airport gave me the impression that somewhere in the world it was hazy and warm out, but that place was not here. Here everything was in sharp relief, cold and clear-cut. Here the world meant business. Here was prime wintering habitat for the Northern Hawk Owl.

We drive down the perfectly straight dirt road which follows the line of an old landing strip, as evidenced by the cracked pavement that continues on when the road turns off. We stop at a likely looking spot near a marsh with lots of good perch trees and hunting areas. After twenty minutes of concentrated searching, no one has found the hawk owl that was reported here a week ago and has been reliably seen ever since. While we've been here, a small crowd has gathered which consists of the owl's original discoverer, Carl Bretton, several other local birders, and our group, the VINS (Vermont Institute of Natural Science) youth birding club.

When I go to the car to put on an extra pair of gloves, I hear someone talking about the hawk owl perching in such and such a place.

"Do you have the bird?" I say, with that strange mix of feigned calmness and contained panic that is invariably present when someone says they see a really rare bird.

"Yes, there it is." Ohmygosh. Oh, my, gosh. They see it. (My thoughts are getting really weird now).

"Where?"

"On top of the left flagpole, above the building."

Yikes! There it is! Long tail (for an owl), brown barred underparts, black-and-white face pattern — just like I'd seen in all the pictures, only it was in real life now.

Strange as it may seem, our group saw two Northern Hawk Owls on that day. The first at the airport, and a second one thirty minutes later and ten miles away in Jefferson Meadows. When our car came to a stop and we got out, we realized we were looking at a second hawk owl. At this point the birding had become so good that it had turned into one of those days when you're kind of dazed, and you can't fully accept what you've just seen. It was inconceivable to me that I could see two Northern Hawk Owls on the same day, one of them completely by chance.

Hawk owls are rare in New England. They are only seen in so-called irruption years, generally when their food, such as rodents and snowshoe hares, is scarce on the breeding grounds. Scarcity such as this also triggers irruptions in various other species such as Gyrfalcons, Snowy Owls, Great Horned Owls, Short-eared Owls, and Rough-legged Hawks. Two main population cycles are recognized in boreal small mammals: four-year in tundra and grassland rodents, and ten-year in snowshoe hares. Just why these populations expand and crash at these times is not completely known, but it invariably results in a southward movement in their avian predators. Another factor causing southward irruptions in hawks and owls is that as prey population levels rise, so do the populations of predators. Therefore, when a mammal population crashes an unusually large number of hawks and owls will move south.

Since this is such a good irruption year (I've heard the term "mega-irruption"), birders are seeing lots of these rare northern raptors. So far, over ten Gyrfalcons have been reported in the eastern United States, along with numerous sightings of Snowy Owls, Rough-legged Hawks, and others.

My advice for birders is to suspend disbelief and keep birding — and to give thanks to the processes of nature that cause this wonderful gift to fly down from regions more northerly.

Will McCumber, fifteen, is home-schooled. He has had a fascination with nature since an early age, and has recently developed a particular interest in the world's avian inhabitants. He has competed in the World Series of Birding on a youth team, the Twin State Tanagers, which has taken top honors in the youth competition two years in a row. Some of his main interests include aging birds in the field and studying the avifauna of the neotropics. He has written columns for The Unity Newsletter in which this article first appeared.

Photograph by Thomas Ryder for the VINS Newsletter

Mallard Ducks

Gareth Perkins

The male mallard has a bright green head with a yellow beak with a black tip on the end. It has a white ring around its neck with a reddish brown breast and brownish

gray back. Its underside is white with a tint of gray. Its wings are all brown, except for a blue patch on the wing. The underside of its tail is black, and then on top there are two black curly feathers.

The female has a mottled brown plumage with black spots on it, and she has a blue patch on her brown wings. She has an orange beak, with a brown spot on the top. Instead of a black tail, like the male, and like her body, she has a mottled tail.

The places you can see mallards are in city parks, ponds, marshes, lakes, rivers, and streams. They are increasing in population in human habitats. Their favorite foods are aquatic plants, small crustaceans, algae, and bread fed to them by people.

In my neighborhood, mallards can be seen at Heard Pond, Walden Pond, the Sudbury River, and the Grist Mill Pond. Mallards are well spread throughout the world. They are nicknamed puddle ducks. Have you seen ducks in the rain before? Once on a rainy day, at the supermarket, I saw a male, female, and young ducklings flying overhead.

A female mallard will lay six to twelve eggs. Those eggs will hatch into ducklings. The ducklings' plumage is yellow with brown along the back and wings. They are covered in down. As the birds get older, they begin to lose their down, becoming full feathered adults. Some of the mallard population is declining, because of careless people dumping trash into their habitat. The ducks either choke or get poisoned because of the trash or pesticides in the marsh.

The mallard's enemies are the crow, skunks, raccoons, and opossums. Foxes and snakes eat the eggs of the mallard, too. The snapping turtle also feeds on eggs or young. The male is very good at protecting the female from getting eaten. He tries either to scare the predator off, or to pretend he's hurt. The predator goes for him — he and the female and sometimes the young flee from the predator.

The mallard's average lifespan is six to nine years. Not many mallards live to be that old because they are either killed by predators, poisoned, or hit something unexpected like telephone wires while they're flying. The oldest mallard duck lived to be twenty-five years old, on a farm pond in Bucks County, PA.

Gareth Perkins *was born in Wales UK, (the native country of Meriwether Lewis's family) in 1990. He has enjoyed books and reading from a very young age and has for a long time now been especially interested in books on bird and animal life. Last year, Gareth took part in the Vermont odyssey trip from the Loring school, during which he particularly enjoyed the visit to the Vermont Raptor Center.*