

YEAR'S HAPPY ENDING

by Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

Unknowingly premature, I closed my 1978 birding journal on December 30th, after a dismal walk through my favorite haunts in Weston. It ended with a question: "Where have all the Blue Jays gone ... and damn near everything else?" Oh well, I thought, it would be good to take it easy the next day, watch the Patriots destroy the Oilers, and rest up for New Year's Eve.

But about one o'clock on the afternoon of the 31st, the phone rang. It was Heather Stymeist, passing the word from Bill Drummond that a Boreal Owl (Aegolius funereus) had been discovered "in the pines at the boat ramp on the Salisbury Beach campground." The Patriots or the owl? ... the owl or the Pats? ... the owl! Quick calls to Eliot Taylor and John Hines: "15 minutes and I'm gone, I'll drive, if you can meet me in time."

We arrived at Salisbury Beach expecting to find a mob, but no one was there! An American Kestrel (Falco sparverius) sat in a small grove of pitch pines as we drove toward the boat ramp. The owl was not in the scattered pines near the ramp, so we returned to the small pine grove up the road and located the owl within minutes.

Then cars began to arrive, and soon we had a cozy gathering of 20 or so birders. While pictures were being taken and field guides checked, Eliot spotted a Short-eared Owl (Asio flammeus) coursing over the salt marsh and someone else saw a Snowy Owl (Nyctea scandiaca) perched atop the tall tower at the edge of the campground. A perfect wintertime triple play!

It was interesting to learn from Peter Alden that this was his last North American owl--heard before, but not seen. Bill Drummond reflected on an owl observed two years earlier in the New Pines that had been passed off as a Saw-whet but now, in retrospect, resembled the diminutive creature before us. Arthur Argue placed a "shocking pink" paper arrow on the road, pointing to the bird, and another in the roost tree itself--"it's been a long time since I've had a chance to use these," he recalled. Truly, the New Year's festivities had begun early!

In the euphoria, conversation naturally turned to the legendary tameness of the Boreal Owl. Someone said that the bird had been patted earlier in the day and measured with a tape--only eight inches high. And to aid my photography, Eliot had held down a branch that intervened within inches of the owl. The collective mood seemed to say, "Well, somebody touch it so we can see for ourselves!"

Peter stepped up and did a "kitchy-kitchy-koo" on the bird's stomach. At first it hiked itself up--seemingly larger than life size--jammed its chin onto its breast, and glared down at the offending finger. Enough was enough! The little owl bolted out of the pine and swooped low to the ground in a graceful semicircle only to land in another tree about ten feet away. Now the bird was in an even better viewing position, quite far out on a limb instead of close to the trunk. Shortly thereafter we started home, for the light was fading fast.

Apparently, on January 1st, hundreds of people crowded Salisbury Beach, coming from as far as Nantucket and even farther. No Boreal Owl was found, and I've heard some second- and third-hand rumblings that some of these birders thought that the owl might have stayed had it not been molested.

In this regard I would like to make three points:

1. While I was with the Boreal Owl, it was not harassed, considering the traditions that surround this particular species. In fact, those present generally took pains to keep to one side of the roost tree, to avoid frightening it. The "touching episode" appeared to be trivial--the owl reacted no more violently than a pet cat that simply had had enough patting and wanted to be alone.

2. The weather may have played the major role in causing the bird to move. Preceding its arrival were ice, cold, and snow to the north; but immediately after the day of discovery the weather turned much warmer. Hopefully, the bird merely retreated to its more natural environment.

3. In retrospect, it would have been better had the bird been left absolutely alone. Perhaps some ethics were tested; but from the owl's point of view, was its situation any more traumatic than, say, being mist-netted for banding purposes? Any trauma, I suspect, afflicted the birders more than the bird!

My journal entry reads: "12/31/78--BOREAL OWL! It was sitting under an erstwhile bird's nest about 7' off the ground. Someone said that it had been measured at 8"--it seemed surprisingly small, I presume a male. Though very tame and generally quiet, the owl would turn its head quickly in response to a noise or sudden movement from behind.

"For field marks, I was most satisfied with the vertical black line over the eye, which curved toward the beak and formed the interior of the facial disk. The beak itself had only a hint of yellow along the ridge of the upper mandible (indicating a young bird?). From the front, this owl seemed distinctly black and white, but from the back it had an overall dark brown coloration. Many white spots dotted the back, wings, tail, and especially the head. The breast had blackish barring, which turned into wide dark streaks on the stomach.

"A perfect photograph is #290 in The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds (Eastern Region ... "

Apparently the last record of a Boreal Owl in Massachusetts occurred in 1942--two sight records according to Griscom and Snyder. A marked flight of this species took place during the winter of 1922-23 when some 30 birds were found.

I'm glad I didn't watch the Patriots game!