

Letters

MORE ON GREAT GRAY OWLS

In the May 1979 issue of *American Birds* there was an article on last winter's Great Gray Owl incursion in the Northeast. In that article, the authors mentioned just one historical invasion, one that happened in the winter of 1890-1891. The "Changing Seasons" in that same issue referred to the "oft-quoted invasion of the years 1889-90." At the time I read this I assumed it was just another misprint. Now I see that you [*C.B.* 1 (2): 30; April 1979] refer to invasions happening in *both* of the aforementioned winters. Were you just trying to stay on the safe side, or were there actually two invasions?

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Here is our understanding of the subject. Evidently there were several flights of Great Gray Owls *Strix nebulosa* in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Numbers reached southern Ontario during several winters, but the largest flight there was recorded in 1889-1890: during that winter one man received 23 specimens, and another received 26 (J.H. Fleming 1907, *Auk* 24: 71-89). Another major flight, which reached more easterly areas, occurred the following winter (1890-1891) when 27 of the owls were handled by a single taxidermist in Maine and a few were recorded in Massachusetts (E.H. Forbush 1927, *Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States*, Vol. 2; R.S. Palmer 1949, *Maine Birds*, Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool. 102). [As for the discrepancy in the *American Birds* treatment: their article's senior author is a leading expert on the birds of Maine, so he was undoubtedly most familiar with the flight described in *Maine birds*; the writers of the "Changing Seasons" column obviously picked up on the big Ontario flight, since it was prominently quoted in A.C. Bent's *Life Histories* series; and in the editing process evidently no one noticed that the dates did not match.]

Thus, in the 1880's-1890's (as in the 1960's-1970's) there were several Great Gray Owl invasions of varying magnitude, one flight reaching New England in a big way but most of them concentrated farther west. The parallels are intriguing. Is it possible that this species goes through long-term population cycles in eastern North America, with the peaks some 70 to 80 years apart? — K.K.