

HINSDALE REVISITED
By Robert P. Yunick

February 20, 1965 was a momentous, never-to-be-forgotten day. Walt Sabin and I journeyed to Hinsdale, Mass., where, in the clear, chilling 10-degree cold of a late winter afternoon we captured and banded the Hinsdale Hawk Owl. The events of this capture were reported in the March-April 1965 EBBA News (28:2, pp. 81-85).

Subsequent to the banding, this owl remained in the Hinsdale area until early or mid-March, whereupon it took off for parts unknown. In the time that has elapsed since the banding, this owl has crossed my mind many times. Beside reliving in reverie the thrill of the capture, I have enjoyed the speculation of wondering whether the bird might ever reappear to be identified by its band; and if so, where? With the passing of each winter, the chances of such an occurrence have grown slimmer and slimmer, and I had given up hope of ever hearing of the bird.

However, there are those who say that some northern owl invasions display a four-year periodicity. This thought, as it applied to this famous owl, never occurred to me until the happenings of last winter passed, and indeed the fact that the winter of 1968-69 was the fourth year since the banding had never occurred to me during the winter.

Winter had not yet relinquished its grip on upstate New York in April, 1969. The time-honored opening of trout season on April 1 found the thermometer at 12°F., only three degrees above a record low. Thus, most everyone was prepared for an unseasonably cool Easter on April 6 when high pressure, resulting from a front which had passed through the area during the night taking with it the rain of the day before, produced an icy brilliant blue sky and calm clear weather - a day reminiscent, except for the lack of snow and a few degrees difference in temperature, of February 20, 1965. At home we prepared for dinner with family guests.

The remaining events of the day were overshadowed by the impact of a telephone call that came at 11:50 a.m. Mr. Philip White, in whose house we had banded the Hawk Owl, was calling from Hinsdale to tell me that "the" owl was back! It had appeared about one hour earlier. As much as I wanted to beat a path to Hinsdale immediately, it was impossible for me to do so. The domestic crisis that would have ensued, had I gone, would have been nothing short of the equivalent of federal revocation of my banding permit. Such are the risks attached to banding.

After discussing the owl's appearance with Mr. White, I told him I would probably come the next Saturday and I asked him to keep an eye on the owl, noting the owl's habits. Needless to say, the rest of the day was a period of great anxiety. By evening a plan of action had been determined. The 1965 owl had liked late afternoon hunting, and the days of

April were already long enough, so that by leaving work a little early I would have enough daylight to attempt a capture. I called Mr. White to tell him I would be at his house at 4:30 Monday afternoon. Walt could not go due to other plans, but Will Merritt was game to see a bal-chatri trap in use.

On Monday afternoon I dashed over to Will's house to secure our bait from Will's blackbird trap, then I picked up Will at work and we were on our way. We arrived earlier than expected; but Mr. White was already home and waiting.

We drove past the Whites', up "Owl Hill" - that one-half to one mile stretch of Route 143 just past Whites' where the owl so faithfully perched during its 1965 residency. There was no owl to be found. Undaunted by this initial disappointment, we met with Mr. White and learned that he had last seen the bird at 6:30 that morning. All day Sunday the bird appeared at the same perches and outlooks about the house used by the bird in 1965. There was no doubt in the Whites' minds that it was the same bird. To me it still remained a matter of gazing on the band, if the bird did indeed have one.

We baited and set three bal-chatri traps in the meadow from which the 1965 owl had been captured. Once or twice we drove the road searching the treetops for a sign of the bird. Back at the Whites' driveway, Mr. White came out with an expectant expression on his face and called our attention to a dot on the horizon over the meadow atop a distant elm. A quick scan afforded only the silhouette of a crow. We waited and waited.

Toward dusk a Woodcock began its nuptial display in the wet meadow. By 6:45 it was nearly dusk and we collected our traps, ever vigilant that the bird might suddenly appear. But it did not. We had struck out. We saw no trace of the owl.

While we failed to ascertain the individual identity of the bird in question, it does seem more than coincidental that a Hawk Owl should appear at the exact same point of residence of four years previous. Further, the fact that the bird chose to use some of the same haunts of the bird of four years previous arouses the suspicion that perhaps it was one in the same Hawk Owl, but we'll never know for sure.

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