

LONG-EARED OWL IN THE WESTERN PANHANDLE OF FLORIDA

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On 30 November 2007, Dustin Rodgers found his cat playing with a small owl in a ditch near his home on Garçon Point, Santa Rosa County, near Milton, Florida. His mother, Donna Rodgers, brought the bird to Dorothy Kaufmann, Director of the Wildlife Sanctuary of Northwest Florida in Pensacola, Escambia County on 1 December. Kaufmann identified it as a male Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*). The Duncans were called and examined the bird, confirming her identification. One of the owl's wings was bruised, and its weight at admission was 200 grams, considerably less than the mean of about 270 grams for a male Long-eared Owl (D. Kaufmann, pers. obs., Dunning 2008). Despite these infirmities the owl, dubbed LEO by sanctuary staff, appeared to be alert. The Sanctuary immediately began rehabilitation procedures, feeding the owl fresh game that it readily consumed. As the bruising healed, the staff placed the bird in an outdoor flight cage for exercise. Photographs taken by Lucy Duncan were submitted to the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (FOSRC) and circulated on the internet. FOSRC members reviewed the photographs and determined that it was a sub-adult, based on the barring on the remiges, and that it was a hatching-year bird, as indicated by the lack of molt (A. Kratter, pers. comm.).

The owl was successfully rehabilitated, gaining 70 grams in 31 days. On a cold and clear New Years Day, 2008, Kaufmann and Sanctuary staff released the bird on a private farm in central Santa Rosa County while about 60 birders and a TV crew from Mobile, Alabama watched. Its flight was strong as it flew into the protected forest surrounding Coldwater Creek. LEO has not been seen or heard again.

In the Western Hemisphere the Long-eared Owl breeds from Canada south to northwestern Baja California, southern New Mexico, and northern Nuevo Leon to central Oklahoma and New England. It winters from southern Canada south to northern and central Mexico, southern Texas, the Gulf Coast and Georgia, and casually to Florida (AOU 1998).

Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) cited only one verifiable Florida specimen, MCZ 248345, Monroe County, 3 November 1898, collected by J. W. Atkins. Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) also considered a December 1966 sighting in Brevard County to be "credible" (Cruikshank 1980). Stevenson and Anderson (1994) accepted the 1898 specimen record, as well as a 1992 occurrence of a sick bird that later died, found 8 December by Kim Petrie in Cassia, Lake County (GEW 5871). All other reports of specimens or sight records were considered inconclusive.

Since the publication of Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) and Stevenson and Anderson (1994), the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (FOSRC) has accepted three Florida records of Long-eared Owl (A. Kratter, pers. comm.): FOSRC #94-290, 20 March 1994, Keith Tarvin et al., videotaped by Brooks Atherton at Archbold Biological Station, Highlands County (Tarvin 1994); FOSRC #95-330, 2 March 1995, a sight report at Archbold Biological Station by B. Pranty and T. Gionfriddo (Pranty 1995); and FOSRC #03-503, 17 April 2003, Garden Key, Monroe County, Larry Manfredi et al., photographed by Murray Gardler (Pranty 2003).

There are 14 records for neighboring Alabama, four of which are coastal, including one sighting on an oil platform 71 miles south of the Alabama coast (G. Jackson, pers. comm.).

The Santa Rosa County report submitted to the FOSRC was accepted as #07-654. This was the first record of the Long-eared Owl for the western Panhandle and about the seventh accepted record for Florida.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.—We thank Dustin and Donna Rodgers for discovering the owl and taking it to the Wildlife Sanctuary of Northwest Florida, providing a valuable record of a bird rare in the state. We appreciate Andy Kratter's help in providing FOSRC information and data to us. Special thanks go to the Wildlife Sanctuary for successfully rehabilitating and returning the owl to the wild, and to Patty and Kenny Born for providing the release site. In addition, Greg Jackson provided information on the status of the Long-eared Owl in neighboring Alabama.

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