

# ONTARIO BIRDS



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# Ontario Field Ornithologists

Ontario Field Ornithologists is an organization dedicated to the study of birdlife in Ontario. It was formed to unify the ever-growing numbers of field ornithologists (birders/birdwatchers) across the province and to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and information among its members. The Ontario Field Ornithologists officially oversees the activities of the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC), publishes a newsletter (*OFO News*) and a journal (*Ontario Birds*), hosts field trips throughout Ontario and holds an Annual General Meeting in the autumn.

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All persons interested in bird study, regardless of their level of expertise, are invited to become members of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. Membership rates can be obtained from the address below. All members receive *Ontario Birds* and *OFO News*. Please send membership inquiries to: **Ontario Field Ornithologists, Box 62014, Burlington Mall Postal Outlet, Burlington, Ontario L7R 4K2.** ( e-mail: ofo@interlog.com).

## Ontario Birds

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The aim of *Ontario Birds* is to provide a vehicle for documentation of the birds of Ontario. We encourage the submission of full length articles and short notes on the status, distribution, identification, and behaviour of birds in Ontario, as well as location guides to significant Ontario birdwatching areas, book reviews, and similar material of interest on Ontario birds.

If possible, material submitted for publication should be double-spaced and typewritten. All submissions are subject to review and editing. Please submit items for publication to the Editors at the address noted above.

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Cover Illustration: Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*) by Howard Coneybeare.

## Letters to the Editors

### Great Blue Heron eats chipmunk

In May 1995, at our house on Little Gull Lake, south of Minden, we were overrun by chipmunks. There must have been 50 racing around! By the beginning of June, we were being visited by a Great Blue Heron on a regular basis. He appeared to be quite bold, coming within 25 feet (8 m) of us before flying off to a safer distance of maybe 50 feet (16 m). We soon discovered he was hunting the chipmunks.

We watched him closely one day and saw him grab a chipmunk in his beak (he did not spear it), and then walk down to the lake. The chipmunk played dead. The heron dipped his catch into the water three times before the chipmunk stopped wriggling, and then swallowed it. He repeated the performance six times in about an hour, before flying off. The heron stayed throughout June and cleaned us out of chipmunks. We noticed an absence of the usual frogs around this time.

We have a pair of Great Blue Herons around the lake every year and one often lands on our dock, but never before have we seen it take a chipmunk.

Mrs. P.M. Fieldus  
Minden, Ontario

### Editors' Note:

While Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*) preying on small mammals has been described previously (e.g., Bent 1926, Palmer 1962), this interesting behaviour is apparently infrequently observed or reported. Some individual herons may actually specialize in terrestrial feeding activity. In his study of radio-tagged Great Blue Herons in

Minnesota, Peifer (1979) reported two herons that appeared to forage exclusively in upland areas for several weeks. The two were observed to capture 36 Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrels (*Spermophilus tridecemlineatus*), five Eastern Chipmunks (*Tamias striatus*), five Prairie Pocket Gophers (*Geomys bursarius*), one juvenile Eastern Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*), and one juvenile Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) during that time! Forty-five of the 48 mammals captured were carried to water, dipped and swallowed head-first, as noted by Mrs. Fieldus.

### Literature Cited

- Bent, A.C. 1926. Life Histories of North American Marsh Birds. United States National Museum Bulletin 135, Washington, D.C.
- Palmer, R.S. 1962. Handbook of North American Birds. Volume 1. Loons to Flamingos. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Peifer, R.W. 1979. Great Blue Herons foraging for small mammals. Wilson Bulletin 91: 630-631.

### Gray Jay captures mouse

Last March, my family and I were out on a Great Gray and Hawk Owl banding trip near Red Lake, when we spotted a flapping of wings on the snow. We first thought it might be a Hawk Owl, but were very surprised to see a Gray Jay jumping on a small mammal (mouse/vole), trying to get a grip on it with its toes, and periodically hitting it hard with its beak. Finally, the small mammal went still and the Gray Jay carried it off to the bush, closely followed by another bird of the same species. The ordeal

lasted maybe 30 seconds from when we first noticed the flapping feathers to when the mammal was carried off. Are Whiskey Jacks hunters of "wild game"?

Doug Gilmore  
Red Lake, Ontario

#### **Dan Strickland comments:**

The observation of a Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*) attacking, killing and carrying off a mouse or vole is very interesting. I have never seen this happen myself although I once saw a mouse pop out of a hole in the snow and the two Gray Jays I was with at the time were instantly "locked on" to it. On that occasion, the mouse went back down into the snow before the jays could do anything about it. There is one report in the literature of a Gray Jay or Jays successfully attacking two different deer mice (Gill 1974). Henri Ouellet (1970) also published a paper on Gray Jay food habits in which he discussed predation (mostly on eggs, nestlings and recently fledged small birds, however, rather than small mammals).

Although there are very few direct observations of Gray Jays preying on mice, there is good reason to think it is a common occurrence. Of 67 non-nesting Gray Jay stomachs I know of whose contents were analyzed, 31 per cent contained fur or bones of small mammals, and, of the 18 stomachs taken in the period from December to February, 14 contained small mammal remains -- suggesting that they could be very important to Gray Jays in the winter (Strickland and Ouellet 1993). This does not prove that the eaten mice were killed by the jays, of course, but given the observations like Doug Gilmore's, it is probably a good bet.

#### **Literature Cited**

- Gill, D.* 1974. The Gray Jay as a predator of small mammals. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 88: 370-371.
- Ouellet, H.* 1970. Further observations on the food and predatory habits of the Gray Jay. *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 48: 327-330.
- Strickland, D. and H. Ouellet.* 1993. Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 40. (A. Poole, A.P. Stettenheim and F. Gill, editors). Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.