

The Ohio Cardinal is devoted to the study and appreciation of Ohio's birdlife. The Ohio Cardinal is published quarterly.

Subscriptions: The subscription rate for four issues is \$12.00. Send all subscriptions to--

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The Ohio Cardinal exists to provide a permanent and timely record of the abundance and distribution of birds in Ohio; to help document the occurrence of rare species in the state; to provide information on identification of birds; and to provide information on birding areas within Ohio.

The Ohio Cardinal invites readers to submit articles on unusual occurrences of birds, bird distribution within the state, birding areas in Ohio, identification tips, and other aspects of ornithology. Bird reports and photographs are welcome from any area in the state. Report forms are not a necessity but will be supplied on request. Unusual species should be documented--documentation forms are also available on request from the Editor, Publisher, and Records Committee Secretary.

In order to keep The Ohio Cardinal timely, seasonal reports are due by the following dates:

Winter--March 10

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Cover: Lesser Golden-Plover, Conneaut Harbor, Sept. 7, 1992

Photo by Gary Meszaros

Great Gray Owl in Ohio by Robert Harlan

It takes a very special attraction to lure over 2500 observers across the snowy western Pennsylvania landscape, but a Great Gray Owl is a powerful magnet. As one of those observers drawn to Warren, PA during the winter of 1991-92, I can well attest to the almost tangible charisma of this species, as, I am sure, can any of the other 2500+ observers (Hall, p. 265) that took part in this pilgrimage. The scene is the same throughout eastern North America whenever these northern invaders appear-- birders are mysteriously, but invariably drawn to them. It is a very special situation indeed when a bird suddenly becomes "an event", allowing many observers the opportunity to convene and become part of the event themselves. In cases such as this, everyone is happy-- the bird stays put, everyone gets a peek, and the bird is so distinctive that identification becomes an afterthought. Identification should be easy with a bird as straightforward as a Great Gray Owl. Except in Ohio, it seems. This species has long presented a troublesome case for Ohio researchers, thanks to sketchy reports, missing specimens, overlooked published records, and just plain bad luck. In this article, I will attempt to bring together all the available literature, introduce some new information, and hopefully clean up many nagging doubts concerning the status of Great Gray Owl in Ohio. In my attempt to coalesce all available information, I have chosen to categorize all observations based on a (mostly) subjective scale, gauging degree of acceptability. All such categorizations are purely my own, and represent no approval/disapproval from any current or former Ohio bird records committee or other individual.

UNACCEPTABLE REPORTS

1). The first published record of Great Gray Owl in Ohio appeared in 1859, in an article "Natural History of the Birds of Ohio", published in the Ohio Farmer newspaper (Kirkpatrick, p. 107). The only data presented is Kirkpatrick's comment that he listed this species "in consequence of an owl answering the description of this species, having been shot some years ago at Huntsburgh, Geauga County." This observation is at least a second-hand report, and fails to include even the season of observation. Strictly anecdotal.

2). In 1970's Birds of the Lake St. Marys Area (Clark & Sipe, p. 37), the authors state that C. W. Williamson, in his History of Western Ohio and Auglaize County (1905) "lists this owl among the birds of Auglaize County and on this basis is included in this list." This report offers nothing at all on which to base an opinion.

3). Homer Price, the well-known oologist from Paulding County,

wrote in The Oologist in 1934: "Mr. Warner Ryel of Payne and Mr. Marsh of Ney, Ohio, have both described large Owls which they saw near Payne and Ney as 'the largest Owls they ever saw and appearing bluish in flight.' Possibly the birds observed were Great Gray Owls." (Price, p. 35). Clearly, Price was merely dealing in conjecture.

4). In 1950, A.B. Williams, editor of The Cleveland Bird Calendar, published an account concerning a sighting by "Mr. M.C. Gilfillan, District Game Management Agent" (Williams, 1950b, p. 12). Mr. Gilfillan spotted a "large, dark owl sitting on the breakwater" along Lake Erie near E. 71st St., Cleveland, on March 25, 1950. After studying the bird in bright sunlight for 15 minutes with 7 x 35 binoculars, he identified the bird as a Great Gray Owl. This identification was based on a) size, described as "giant" when compared to a fly-by Canvasback; b) color, which "seemed almost black"; and c) large "facial discs...strongly marked with concentric circles." Barred Owl cannot be safely eliminated by these details, although the habitat choice would be most peculiar for this species. Just prior to this sighting, Williams authored the thoroughly researched book Birds of the Cleveland Region. Of course, Williams had no opportunity to include this sighting in his book (Williams, 1950a, p. 80). However, the late Donald L. Newman, editor of The Cleveland Bird Calendar from 1954 to 1967, regularly updated his personal copy of Williams' book with sightings made after its publication. Newman's personal copy is now housed in the Cleveland Museum on Natural History library. An examination of Newman's marginalia shows that he did annotate this report into his copy-- but later, for reasons unknown, crossed it out. Presumably, Newman, being closer chronologically to the sighting, was able to determine to his own satisfaction that the record was ultimately unacceptable. This record is intriguing, but, in the end, falls short.

POSSIBLY CORRECT

5). Frank Langdon's "A Revised List of Cincinnati Birds", published in 1879, contains an interesting report included under Langdon's heading of "Species of probable occurrence, not yet identified". Langdon states that this species was "identified by Mr. Dury in Clark Co., Ohio." (Langdon, p. 188). Charles Dury and Langdon, both from the Cincinnati area, were widely-respected authorities in their day. Indeed, J.M. Wheaton, writing soon after Langdon's report was published (probably between 1880 and 1882), stated that Langdon's work was "the most accurate and reliable list yet published of Ohio Birds" (Wheaton, p. 610). In his very entertaining opus The Birds of Ohio (1903), William Leon Dawson elaborates on this sighting:

"One autumn day some thirty years ago Charles Dury, of

Cincinnati, was out quail-hunting with some farmers' boys in Clark County, near South Charleston. While in pursuit of a scattered covey in a dense thicket, he came suddenly upon a monster Owl, the like of which he had never seen alive. A quick shot fired full in the bird's face, blinded it, but did not inflict a mortal wound. Spreading its ample wings it fluttered away, regardless of a second shot fired after it...Realizing that he had lost a prize, the young collector scoured the neighboring woods in search of it, but without avail." (Dawson, p. 380).

Based on Dury's familiarity with the expected birds of Ohio, and the respect of his contemporaries, I feel it appropriate to put some weight in this sighting, despite a lack of plumage details and season of occurrence.

6). Sam Wharram was for many years a well respected naturalist in Ashtabula County. Wharram's life-long interest in birds is evident in an article he penned in 1943, at age 77, "The Passenger Pigeon in Ohio" (Wharram, 1943, p. 65-68), in which he relates his boyhood memories of this now extinct species in Ashtabula County in the late 1870's. Although the Passenger Pigeons would be long gone by 1913, Ashtabula County was still a wild place. This was the year that Wharram published an article entitled "Birds of Prey, Northern Ohio". In this article, Wharram described the status of all the typical owl species in his area, regarding Great Horned Owl as "quite common", the Barred Owl as "very common", the Long-eared and Short-eared Owls as being seen "occasionally", etc. Then Wharram makes the somewhat understated profession that "During the winter of 1901 two Great Gray Owls lived in the big woods. I saw them almost daily while at work; they seemed quite tame. Since then I have not seen any of them." (Wharram, 1913, p. 87-88). Although details are very sketchy, this report has that certain "ring of truth" about it, and I have no qualms about placing it in this category.

VERY LIKELY CORRECT

7). Few naturalists were as well respected and more widely-versed in the natural sciences as Milton B. Trautman. His many publications give ample evidence of his capacity as a superior observer. As related in 1956, Trautman found a Great Gray Owl perched on a tree on Starve Island in Lake Erie on October 30, 1947. This bird was being harassed by a flock of Herring Gulls. Trautman continues:

"This owl's plumage was predominantly dusky, not brownish as are the plumages of the Great Horned Owl...; the streakings on neck and upper breast were vertical, not barred as are Northern Barred Owls...; the huge, globular-shaped head contained large facial disks; the irises were yellow; the tail appeared to be far longer in comparison to body length than are the tails of

Horned, Barred, and Snowy...and the ventral surface of the tail was barred and the distal end rounded. When I approached to within 200 feet of the bird, it left the tree and flew past me, whereupon I was able to note that its round-tipped wings were much wider and apparently somewhat longer than were the wings of the Herring Gulls and that there was a darkish area in the centers near the bases of the primaries on the underside of each wing." (Trautman, p. 274-75).

Despite being a single-observer sighting without a specimen or photograph, I feel that the great attention to detail evident in this report would allow virtually any records committee (that does not require physical evidence for extreme rarities) to accept this observation without hesitation.

UNQUESTIONABLY CORRECT

8). This final record has led a very interesting life. To the best of my knowledge, the first published acknowledgement of this particular Great Gray Owl appeared in Flying Feathers, the rather obscure organ of Youngstown's Grant Cook Bird Club. Although published for only a short period (1950-55), this journal included two notes concerning this bird. The first appeared in 1950, in William C. Baker's review of Donald J. Borror's "Check List of the Birds of Ohio with the Migration Dates for the Birds of Central Ohio", published earlier the same year. [Borror includes the Great Gray Owl only in his "Hypothetical List" (Borror, p. 11), featuring species listed on the basis of "old records of specimens that cannot now be located, or on sight records."] In his review, Baker states that "Doubtless there are other specimens in the Mill Creek Park Museum besides the Great Gray Owl (Mr. Borror obviously knows nothing about this bird) which deserve wider knowledge than they now have." (Baker, p. 7). [Mill Creek Park is located in Youngstown]. Later, in 1954, Lyle D. Miller states in his article "Preliminary Survey of the Birds of Youngstown, Ohio" that "there is a mounted bird in the Old Mill Museum marked as taken near Hubbard, Ohio". (Miller, p. 22). Evidently, in spite of these notations, this record still did not acquire the desired "wider knowledge", since in 1968, Milton B. and Mary A. Trautman's Annotated List of the Birds of Ohio fails to include the species at all. Trautman's own 1947 sighting was not included because it was decided that the list "should include only species represented by at least one preserved specimen in some accredited museum." (Trautman & Trautman, p. 257). As far as I am aware, this record has not been published since 1954, and seems once again to have fallen into obscurity.

Here the story gets even more intriguing. John M. Condit, Curator of the Ohio State University Museum of Biological Diversity in Columbus, Ohio, recalls hearing rumors of this specimen's appearance at Columbus sometime in the 1980's,

but its exact whereabouts at the Museum were unknown for approximately 5 years. Only in the past year or so did the specimen turn up again. While in the process of moving the collection from one building to another, Condit and Mary Gustafson found the bird tucked away in the back of a specimen tray as part of Milton Trautman's personal teaching specimens (Condit, personal communication). It seems that Trautman became aware of the Mill Creek Park specimen sometime subsequent to his 1968 Annotated List, and managed to acquire it for the State Museum. A recent examination of the specimen (OSUM #16625) at Columbus finally brought together all the pieces of the puzzle. One tag attached to the bird stated that the specimen was acquired in an exchange with the Mill Creek Museum on February 19, 1976. Another tag stated that the bird was "killed in Hubbard, Ohio, [Trumbull Co.] by C.C. Allen in Brade's Woods, November or December about 1898. The specimen was given to George L. Fordyce [of Youngstown] who had it mounted by Taxidermist Ward. (Information by C.C. Allen who was surprised to find the owl in the [Mill Creek] Museum in 1943)." [Information in brackets added by the author--RH]. A photograph of this specimen appears in this issue. It may have taken almost 100 years, and the route may have been long and circuitous, but this record finally and undisputably establishes the Great Gray Owl as an Ohio species.



Great Gray Owl specimen, OSUM #16625
Photo by Ed Pierce

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank John M. Condit, Curator of Higher Vertebrates, Ohio State University Museum of Biological Diversity, for information regarding and access to the Great Gray Owl specimen at Columbus. Mr. Condit would like to let everyone know that the Museum's collection has been moved from Sullivant Hall to 1315 Kinnear Road, and is open to members of the public for serious research purposes. Appointments are required, and should be obtained from Mr. Condit by calling (614) 292-0543. I would also like to thank Wendy Wasman, Librarian at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, for allowing access to much of the literature cited throughout this report.

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An Overview of the 1992 Fall Hawk Flight in Northwest Ohio by Tom Kemp and Matt Anderson

As developing birders in the Toledo area, we learned that there were often good hawk flights in the fall on days with northwest winds. Unfortunately, this idea of westerly winds producing the flights prevailed until only recently. It was not until this fall, as we made a concerted effort to chart the movement of hawks through the area, that we discovered raptors are moving through on winds from virtually any direction and that the best flights were in fact on days with east winds, not west! This piece is presented as an overview of the 1992 fall hawk flight in northwest Ohio.

This fall, we specifically watched for migrating hawks on 29 days from September 6 until November 29, for a total of approximately 90 hours. Our best day was unquestionably September 12 when over 1600 hawks passed over the Oak Openings of western Lucas County. Most of these were Broad-winged Hawks. The following day produced over 500 hawks, most of which were again Broad-wingeds. The only other day when truly large numbers were seen was October 4. Almost all of the nearly 300 birds seen that day were Turkey Vultures and Sharp-shinned Hawks. Monthly totals were 2363 for September (93% Broad-wingeds), 1244 for October (65% Turkey Vultures), and 122 for November (57% Red-taileds). Needless to say, the November flight was beset by many days of bad weather and was rather disappointing.

Top individual days (with wind direction) for selected species follow. There were four 100+ days for Turkey Vulture: October 4 (east), October 7 (south), October 22 (southeast), and October 23 (southwest). The top day for Sharp-shinned Hawk was October 4 when 60 were counted. No other day came close to this. October 31 (east) was the best Red-shouldered Hawk day with 33 being seen. This was almost half of the entire season's total. Broad-winged Hawks numbered 1590 on September 12 and 476 on September 13 (both southeast). The best Red-tailed Hawk day was October 31 when 74 were counted. The Table provides a complete list of species and numbers seen.

That large numbers of raptors should be seen migrating through northwest Ohio each fall should come as no surprise. Thousands of hawks round the western end of Lake Erie at Holiday Beach Provincial Park in southwest Ontario, and then head south. It is likely that most of these pass through the Toledo area on their way to their wintering quarters. That we seen so many of them right over our yards (near Oak Openings Metropark) is due to geography. Our homes lay on a line due