

Photo Salon I

The Northern Owl Invasion: Winter 2004–2005

Southern Manitoba, along with much of southern-central Canada, was awash in northern owls in winter 2004–2005. Their numbers, already high by late November from Saskatchewan to Québec, continued to increase through the winter, marking the season as one of the largest irruptions of Great Gray, Boreal, and Northern Hawk Owl in years. Though many owls were stressed or starving, their tenacity and hardiness were a source of admiration to the many birders who traveled northward to witness the season's spectacle.



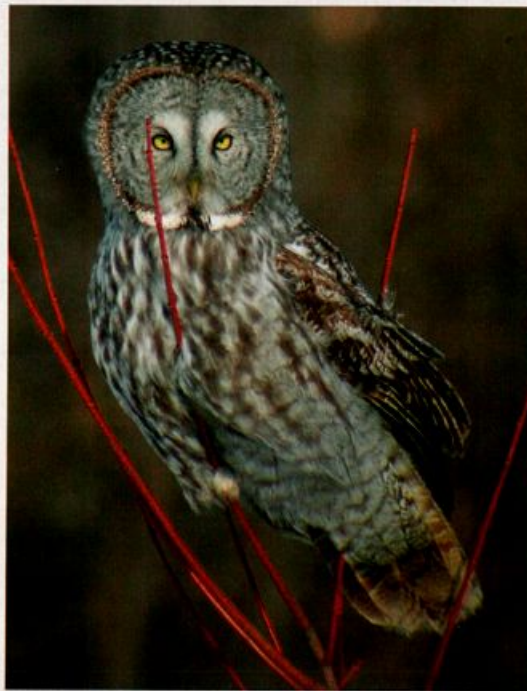
This Northern Hawk Owl with vole was photographed 17 December 2004 at Winnipeg, Manitoba. All three species on this page are highly dependent on microtine voles for surviving the winter months. *Photograph by Christian Artuso.*



Unlike its larger cousins (and perhaps in order to avoid being eaten by large owls such as Great Horneds), Boreal Owls are nocturnal hunters that locate prey by ear. Boreals that hunt diurnally, such as this one in Steinbach, Manitoba (10 February 2005), are probably stressed or starving. *Photograph by Christian Artuso.*



This Great Gray Owl with vole (left) was photographed 10 December 2004 near Pinawa, Manitoba; the bird at right was found 11 November 2004 near Patricia Beach. Northern owl populations, as well as their southward irruptions, are closely tied to fluctuations in populations of prey species. In records kept by James Duncan of the Manitoba Conservation Department, the numbers of small mammals recorded in Minnesota's Roseau Bog area in autumn 2004 were the lowest recorded since 1992. *Photograph by Christian Artuso.*



This Great Gray Owl photographed 5 January 2005 was one of about 10 present all winter on Île Bizard, Montréal, Québec. The largest owl species in North America, Grays are nonetheless 15% lighter in weight than Great Horned Owl, thus capable of perching on tree limbs apparently too small for their bulk. Photograph by Pierre Bannon.



The gaze of a Great Gray Owl has as much to do with listening as with looking. Highly specialized asymmetrical ears allow for precise location of prey items by sound alone. This bird at Peterborough, Ontario on 27 January 2005 is probably responding to the sound of a rodent tunneling through the snow. Photograph by Adrian Binns.



Boreal Owls visit Owl Woods on Amherst Island, Ontario (here 27 January 2005) during most flight years of the species. In the past, there have been problems with overzealous individuals disturbing these birds or even breaking off branches, but vigilance by local birders has resulted in a marked improvement in the ethical behavior of visitors. Photograph by Adrian Binns.



This Northern Hawk Owl, photographed 13 February 2005 at Bracebridge, Ontario, has captured what appears to be a rat. Hawk owls lack the asymmetrical ear openings of Great Grays and are thought to hunt mostly by sight. They often hunt from conspicuous perches. Photograph by Adrian Binns.



Great Gray Owls are quite active while hunting, often plunging face-first into snow—and able to break through an ice crust strong enough to support 150-pound person. This Great Gray with Deer Mouse was photographed 27 January 2005 at Bracebridge, Ontario. Photograph by Adrian Binns.



Most Great Gray Owls in the winter invasion appeared to be adults, which normally hold winter territories within the breeding range unless forced out by prey scarcity. The uniformity of color in the remiges of this bird (27 January 2005, near Orillia, Ontario) suggests that it is more than three years old. Photograph by Adrian Binns.



Iowa's second Northern Hawk Owl was found on Valentine's Day 2005 (here 26 February) in Manly, Worth County, Iowa; perhaps the southernmost of all the hawk owls in this winter's invasion, it obligingly stayed through the end of the month. Photograph by Stephen J. Dinsmore.



This Boreal Owl—Iowa's first—was photographed quite early in the owl invasion, on 14 November 2004, in George Wyth State Park, Blackhawk County. Unfortunately, it was not relocated after being identified a bit belatedly by examination of photographs. Photograph by Scott Garrett.



This Boreal Owl in Central Park, New York, New York 19 (here 20) December 2004–14 January 2005 was first found on the Lower Hudson Christmas Bird Count and seen subsequently by hundreds of birders. It represents one of the most southerly records of the species on the Atlantic coast. Photograph by Deborah Allen.



A Boreal Owl in the town of Wilson, Niagara New York (here 23 January 2005) was one of five recorded in New York state this winter—called "an invasion" by modern standards. Photograph by Willie D'Anna.



The bogs between the towns of Sax and Zim in St. Louis County, Minnesota are a mecca for northern owls during invasion years. By the end of January 2005, 1715 Great Gray, 400+ Boreal, and 300+ Northern Hawk Owls had been tallied statewide. This vole-diving Great Gray Owl was photographed in that area 16 January. Photograph by Tony Leukering.



Taken in the Sax-Zim Bog area 28 January 2005, this photograph of a Great Gray shows the different-aged remiges nicely. Large *Strix* owls have molt centers in both the primaries and secondaries as well as the corresponding coverts. The innermost primaries (p1-3) in this bird are new and contrast with the middle three retained feathers—which contrast with the outer four, which are also new. Experts suggest that this bird is probably in its third calendar year (thus 18–19 months old). Photograph by Tim Avery.