

The Boreal Owl Influx

by Gary Anweiler, Melville

During this past winter (1959-60) a heavy influx of Boreal Owls (*Aegolius funerea richardsoni*) formerly known as Richardson's Owls, were noted in Saskatchewan. They were concentrated chiefly in the Yorkton-Melville area of the east-central part of the province. Dr. Houston and I accumulated 38 positive records and received numerous other unconfirmed reports of "little owls." Twenty-five Boreal Owls (and two Saw-whet Owls) were banded by Dr. Houston.

Many of these very tame little owls can be captured by hand, owing probably to their lack of contact with humans. They are so tame that they can always be approached closely and about 50% of them can be captured by hand. To raise this percentage, I devised a snare which proved far superior to the hand method of capture. An ordinary slip noose was made from a piece of nylon monofilament fishline of 12 lb. test. When this line is stretched, it will form an open loop of up to 6 inches in diameter as wire will, an important property lacking in string. Wire could be used, but will not close as easily or quickly as the nylon. The noose is attached to the end of an 8 foot pole, which allows you to snare the wariest Boreal Owl without flushing it. A noose of this size was, in 9 out of 10 cases, slipped completely over the bird and around its feet, thus protecting the bird against injury. However, a pair of scissors was kept handy so that the bird could be immediately released, as was necessary once, when the noose became snared around its neck. This snare successfully captured all eight Boreal Owls on which it was tried. It was also tried on two released birds which could not be hand caught and it worked in both cases.

As proof of what careful constant observation can produce, four trees within 50 feet of our house were checked three or four times daily and produced five owls, two of which were captured on the same perch. Banding proved that these were all different individuals. One additional bird was located for me



Photo by Dr. S. Houston

Gary Anweiler and the Boreal Owl

by Terry Allan and was also snared and banded, making a total of six birds right in the residential sector of Melville.

The Boreal Owl seems to be drawn to buildings, particularly barns and elevators. This is probably due to the high population of House Sparrows and mice frequenting these places. Nearly half of the birds were captured in such places.

A fairly good sample of their food was obtained, chiefly from the pellets found under their perches (see Table 2). House Mice and House Sparrows, respectively, were the major food items. These two species both a scourge to the farmer, composed 83% of the birds' total diet. These added to other unwanted mice, made up 93% of the diet. One chickadee comprised 2%. The remaining 5% of the diet was composed of small unidentified birds.

Two Boreal Owls were kept in captivity, one for two weeks and one for three weeks. When given a choice, they showed a definite preference for mice over sparrows. They have voracious appetites. One bird ate an average of 50 grams nightly and on one occasion ate 70 grams, or nearly half its weight,

in one night! The other ate an average of 39 grams nightly. The first bird was tamer and gained five grams, the other was wilder and lost five grams. They originally weighed 165 and 145 grams, and were thought to be females, as the

females are larger and heavier than the males.

Additional records for the province came in this winter from the following localities, with one bird from each: Dysart, Fort Qu'Appelle, High Hill, Nipawin, Prince Albert, Regina and Saskatoon.

Table 1—Records

Locality	Date	Record	Reporter	Where caught	Wing length (in.)**	Tail length (in.)	Wt. (gms.)
Saltcoats	Dec. 19/59	S*	B. Horseman	weasel trap	7.2 (f)	4.2	—
Melville	Jan. 7/60	B*	G. Anweiler	spruce tree	7.2	—	—
Melville	Jan. 9/60	B	G. Anweiler	maple tree	7.0	—	—
Gerald	Jan. 15/60	S	G. Hruska	—	7.0	3.5	—
Melville	Jan. 16/60	B	R. Almasi	poplar	6.25	—	—
Kamsack	Jan. 16/60	B	A. Solonenko	—	6.5	3.4	—
Gerald	Jan. 16/60	S	D. Hruska	—	6.9	3.5	—
Melville	Jan. 18/60	B	G. Anweiler	poplar	7.2	4.0	115
Saltcoats	Jan. 21/60	B	S. Czakler	—	—	—	—
Veregin	Jan. 24/60	S	Tysowski	trees	6.7 (f)	3.6	—
Melville	Jan. 24/60	S	A. Reeves	granary	7.3 (f)	3.9	—
Calder	Jan. 24/60	B	M. Busch	shed	7.1	—	—
Cana	Jan. 24/60	S	S. Shebeluk	—	7.25	—	—
Calder	Jan. 25/60	B	A. Soyka	shed	6.75	—	—
Yarbo	Jan. 25/60		W. Anderson	tree	—	—	—
Dubuc	Jan. 26/60	S	H. Dohms	hay bales	6.8 (f)	3.7	—
Fenwood	Jan. 28/60	B	Mrs. Liske	barn	7.1	3.1	150
Inglis, Man.	Jan. 28/60	B	E. Rooke	warehouse	6.9	3.3	120
Saltcoats	Jan. 29/60		P. Kluk	barn	—	—	—
Arran	Jan. 29/60	B	A. Kobicz	tree	6.8	3.6	130
Clonm. l	Jan. 30/60	S	Ed Paley	bush	6.6	3.7	115
Tuffnell	Feb. 1/60	B	G. Anweiler	—	7.3	3.5	—
Melville	Feb. 3/60	B	H. Laube	maple tree	7.5	4.1	165
Springside	Feb. 4/60	B	G. Anweiler	shed	7.0	3.5	—
Melville	Feb. 5/60	S	C. Wintonyk	maple tree	—	—	—
Wroxton	Feb. 6/60	S	J. Provick	haystack	6.5	3.4	—
Yarbo	Feb. 10/60	B	M. Lucas	barn	6.75	3.8	—
Hazelcliffe	Feb. 20/60	S	G. Anweiler	—	—	—	—
Melville	Feb. 22/60	S	E. Kaeding	—	7.7	3.7	115
Saltcoats	Feb. 24/60	B	M. Paulger	garage	7.0	3.6	—
Bredenbury	Feb. 25/60	B	S. Houston	—	6.25	3.1	—
Yorkton	Feb. 28/60	B	S. Houston	barn	6.7	3.5	—
Melville	Mar. 5/60	B	G. Anweiler	spruce tree	7.1	4.1	155
Rocanville	Mar. 5/60	B	M. Machniak	spruce tree	6.9	3.7	110
Margo	Mar. 10/60	B	L. Craig	elevator	7.25	3.75	—
Margo	Mar. 10/60	B	A. Shinkewski	shed	7.25	4.0	—
Calder	Mar. 14/60	B	P. Adams	barn	6.6	3.5	—
Cana	Apr. 4/60	B	G. Anweiler	elevator	7.0	3.9	140
Saltcoats	Apr. 27/60	B	B. Horseman	magpie nest	6.8	3.75	—

* B—banded by Dr. Stuart Houston. S—specimen.

** f after wing measurement means flat measurement; all others are wing chord.

Table 2

Winter food of the Boreal Owl (determined for 15 birds in 1960 by analysis of 37 pellets*, contents of two stomachs, and one kill.)

Food Items	No. of Items	%
Meadow Vole	1	2.4%
Deer Mouse	1	2.4%
House Mouse	20	47.6%
Gapper's Vole	1	2.4%
Masked Shrew	1	2.4%
House Sparrow	15	37.7%
Chickadee	1	2.4%
Unidentified	2	4.8%
TOTAL	42	100%

*Twenty-four pellets from one bird

Acknowledgments: The influx of Boreal Owls this winter has provided an unusual opportunity for the study of this owl. I am grateful to all those who co-operated in this study, and especially to Dr. Stuart Houston who gave me so much assistance.

Ed. Note: An interesting note on unusual influxes of Boreal Owls is given by Arthur C. Bent in *Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey*, Part 2, p. 227: "a few large autumnal flights of this species have been observed. One occurred through the interior of British Columbia during the winter of 1898-99. During the winter of 1904 Richardson's owls were fairly common in the Red River Valley of North Dakota. For the first time in many years a heavy flight was recorded at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, during the winter of 1922-23, the last of the season being observed on March 4, 1923. In this same season a large flight was witnessed at Ottawa, Ontario." We note that Anweiler's last date for the season is the remarkably late date of April 27. This bird, probably a male, make us speculate whether any Boreal Owls might remain in the south this year and nest in hollow trees far south of their normal range.

Some of the specimens listed by Anweiler were sent to the SMNH. These and three other specimens sent to the Museum during the past winter were measured, weighed, and sex determined. The following table shows the results:

Locality	Date	Collector	Wing (flat) mm.	Tail mm.	Sex
Dysart	19 Jan.	Frank	185	100	F
Regina	24 Jan.	Vickerman	176	109	F
Saltcoats	19 Dec.	Horseman	182	106	?
Melville	24 Jan.	Reeves	185	99	F
Saltcoats	30 Jan.	Rooke	170	94	M
Dunleith	26 Jan.		172	94	M
Calder	24 Jan.	Busch	168	92	M

Previous SMNH specimen records include: April 30, 1891, Indian Head, G. Lang (1); Oct. 7, 1894, Indian Head, G. Lang (1); Feb. 25, 1923, Mistatim, W. A. Owen (1); March 19, 1923, n.p. (1); Dec. 7, 1926, n.p.

(1); Feb. 4, 1947, Regina, F. G. Bard (1). Note also previous *Blue Jay* records: banded by M. G. Street, Nipawin, Nov. 23, 1946; photographed at its nest hole, C. Hampson, Edmonton, Alberta; reported by F. Mowat at the north end of Montreal Lake, May, 1946; living for three months of the winter in a hayloft at Punnichy, M. Runyan, 1950, and a report by R. Peterson of Tofield, Alberta, in 1954.—L. R. Ostoforoff.

Winter Food of the Short-eared Owl

by Glen A. Fox, Kindersley

During the winter of 1959-1960 I collected pellets of the Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*). On January 23, 1960, I discovered a roost in holes in the north bank of a dam one mile south and one half mile east of Kindersley. Three owls were occupying the roost: two females and one male. I collected a total of 16 pellets from this site.

On December 27, 1959, Gary Anweiler found a roost in the foundation of an old building one quarter of a mile north of the Melville Hospital. The owl roosted on pilings which placed the owl about one foot below ground level. Anweiler collected seven pellets from this roost.

Composition of Short-eared Owl pellets

Prey species	No. in Kindersley pellets	No. in Melville pellets
Meadow Vole	10	10
Deer Mouse	45	0
Total	55	10

PROPOSED NORTHERN RAILWAY THREATENS WHOOPING CRANES

A Canadian Press "newsmag" printed early this winter in many eastern daily newspapers showed proposed routes for a new 400 mile railway from Waterways or Grimshaw in Alberta to the shore of the Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories. The exact route of the new railway has not been surveyed but the map shows the proposed line from Waterways going right through the Wood Buffalo Park. This is the area in which the Whooping Cranes nest. Since the route from Grimshaw does not go through this nesting area we should if possible encourage serious consideration of this more western route.