

THE NORTHERN HAWK-OWL NESTING AT CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

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Fig. 1. A spruce stump on top of which a Northern Hawk-Owl nest was located; Churchill, Manitoba, July 1989. Gilles Seutin

Churchill, Manitoba is ornithologically the best known subarctic location in Canada. In 1934 Taverner and Sutton conducted the first detailed study of the avifauna of Churchill, which was the result of two summers they spent there, observing and collecting several species which were poorly known to the ornithological community at that time.⁷ Since then, the region has been visited by hundreds of birdwatchers and professional ornithologists and the local avifauna has been well described by Jehl and Smith, and more recently by Charbonneau. These two books, and that of Seutin, can be consulted for a descrip-

tion of the diversity of habitat encountered at this tree-line location.⁶ Because of the intense birdwatching activity in the Churchill region during the breeding season, including at distant sites such as LaPerouse Bay (45 km e of Churchill) and Cape Churchill (55 km e of Churchill) where groups from Queens' University and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service are studying Snow Geese and Canada Geese, it is generally believed that we have a very good knowledge of the breeding avifauna of the region. It was therefore significant to find the Northern Hawk-Owl breeding there for the first time during the summer of 1989.

Two active nests of the Northern Hawk-Owl were found in 1989. The first nest was discovered in late June and contained an unknown number of nestlings. As it is typical for the species,⁴ it was located in the hollow at the top end of a broken tree trunk, a spruce, about 2 m above ground. The habitat surrounding the nest was typical wet taiga (open spruce forest). On 30 June, in the trees close to the nest, two fledglings were aggressively guarded by the parents.

I found the second nest on 3 July in a similar, but drier, habitat. It was located in the hollow top of an old spruce stump, about 7 m from ground (Fig. 1). This stump was at the edge of an open, disturbed gravel area (30 x 200 m) with extensive poplar and willow regrowth at places, especially on the edges. Surrounding this area, the habitat was an open taiga with clumps of small spruce and tamarack (less than 2 m high on average) and several dispersed tall spruce (less than 10 m high) on top of which the adult Hawk-Owls were perching. When the nest was found, it contained at least three large nestlings. The fate of this nest is not known since I left Churchill 3 days later.

Godfrey included Churchill in his map of the breeding range of the Northern Hawk-Owl, probably based on the assumption that the species nests all across North America in mixed and boreal forests up to the tree line.³ However, before 1989, the species has never been reported to breed in the Churchill region. Jehl and Smith state that "there is as yet no evidence that Northern Hawk-Owl have nested in the Churchill region."⁵ More recently, Chartier reported the species as "extremely rare" and does not include it in the list of species that have been reported to breed in the region.

It is significant that these nests were found in a year when the lemming population was very high (A.M.

Tuchscherer, pers. comm.). In 1989, lemming abundance was also correlated with the breeding of a higher than average number of Rough-legged Hawks (personal observation).

Further, these nesting attempts can be attributed to the displacement of adults by forest fires since the major fires burned across northern Manitoba in 1988 only started in July, several weeks after the start of either nest.

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- ⁶ JOHNSON, K.L. 1987. Wildflowers of Churchill and the Hudson Bay Region. Manitoba Mus. of Man and Nature, Winnipeg.
- ⁷ TAVERNER, P.A. and G.M. SUTHERLAND. 1934. The birds of Churchill, Manitoba. Annals Carnegie Mus. 23:1-83.