

FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

Chickadees Mob Saw-whet in White Pine.

On January 18, 1986, I made a census trip shortly after noon to a study lot on town conservation land in Foxboro, Massachusetts. In a one-acre stand of white pines surrounded by Oak-Maple forest (Davis, W. 1977, *American Birds* 32:50), I noticed two Black-capped Chickadees flying back and forth high in the crown of a White Pine. I was interested in seeing whether the chickadees were birds that I had banded in my back yard. (As part of a broader study, I band birds in the winter to determine whether the birds foraging in the woods are the same birds that frequent my feeders and traps.) When I located one of the chickadees in my binoculars, I found that it was perched less than a foot from an adult Northern Saw-whet Owl on a small branch among the needle sprays, approximately forty feet from the ground and six or seven feet from the trunk. The two chickadees continued mobbing the owl for several minutes, flying back and forth, often landing within a foot of it. I did not observe any feather pulling. The two chickadees were joined in the crown of the White Pine by three others, but these additional birds, although agitated, did not make close passes at the owl. The owl responded to my imitations of the saw-whet owl call by peering down at me.

This observation is interesting for two reasons: (1) the owl was mobbed by chickadees and was discovered because of the mobbing activity, and (2) the bird was forty feet high in a White Pine, which seemed an unusual place to find a Northern Saw-whet Owl. I asked a number of experienced bird observers whether they had ever seen a saw-whet owl at that height. Robert Stymeist told me that he had seen saw-whets perched high up in trees twice before, both in White Pines, and both some distance from the trunk. Two other observers said that saw-whets had been reported in White Pines at considerable heights. However, most of those consulted had never seen a saw-whet owl perched higher than ten feet above the ground, and most reported that the birds usually perched very close to the trunk.

There were no splash marks on the tree and no pellets on the ground, suggesting that the bird did not roost in the tree regularly. It was still present on the same perch four hours after the first observation, but was gone when next looked for two days later.

William E. Davis, Jr., Foxboro

Pontoppidan's Pursuer.

Eight of us on the Salisbury Beach access road had been admiring an adult Northern Harrier perched on a stump in the dunes to the east and then on the south had delighted in the interplay of yet another harrier with a Rough-legged Hawk. Suddenly the gulls and ducks resting on the marsh to the west were in the air! A large, dark bird was flying steadily northward over the estuary - an immature Bald Eagle! It was not the so-called "Osprey" eagle with the stripe through its eye, which has fascinated so many birders this winter on the Merrimack, but a younger bird with far less white in its plumage. High above and well behind, three raptors, apparently in pursuit, were soon outdistanced by the very strong, purposeful flight of the eagle, who appeared oblivious to the great commotion created by his passage. Now the three raptors turned upon themselves engaging in mutual harassment (play?), twisting, turning, swooping, diving at one another - two birds discernible in binoculars as dark-phase Rough-legs - the third smaller and lighter colored. Could it be a male light-phase Rough-leg? It had the dark carpal patches, but the overall shape was wrong, and it accelerated so much faster than the other two, climbing above them and diving down with wings curved back, the wingtips pointed, then hovering for a moment as it presented its talons. A falcon, perhaps? But the plumage was too light in color, the silhouette frontally too flat - yet a bird of comparable spirit, challenging his adversaries again and again. The Rough-legs took off northward. This territory was too well defended. Binoculars that had followed his combative course high in the sky now focused on the valiant fellow's descent. Down came a . . . Short-eared Owl!

Upon arriving home and delving into the literature (A. C. Bent, *Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey*, Part II 1938; Allan Eckert, *The Owls of North America* 1974; Heimo Mikkola, *Owls of Europe* 1983; R. Meinertzhagen, *Pirates and Predators* 1959), I found that Short-eared Owls are not always low-flying birds, gracefully quartering the marshes and meadows like "giant butterflies." All the references note this species' penchant for high flight and agility in performing astonishing aerial maneuvers. They also mention the harassment of large birds in flight (Great Blue Herons, American Black Ducks, egrets, gulls, cranes, and vultures), apparently without intent to kill or injure but for amusement. Mikkola further comments that the Short-eared Owl is strongly territorial, not only in the breeding season, but also over his winter hunting area, where he is vigorously responsive to trespass. The size of the territory defended varies according to the availability of food.

Nancy Clayton, Concord

Fairhaven Massacre.

On March 9, 1986, the day of this terribly exciting event, three inches of new snow lay on the ground at our Wenham home, which is situated in the middle of an old apple orchard in fairly open country. The usual bird species wintering in this area come regularly to our bird feeders. The large corn feeder on the ground in the backyard has been a steady attraction for twelve to fifteen Ring-necked Pheasants throughout the winter. Several times in the last few weeks I had noticed small collections of feathers on the snow. Usually they seemed to be Blue Jay or Mourning Dove feathers - many of these frequent the feeder. Once, my wife had noticed big wing prints in the snow with a few small flecks of blood in the center of them. We speculated that an owl or hawk had swooped down and taken a meal. I had kept a careful watch for marauding raptors, but nary a culprit was seen except for the usual Red-tailed Hawks that soar past almost daily. Where was the Sharp-shinned, the Cooper's, or perhaps the Great Horned Owl hiding?

On this eventful Sunday, my wife walked into the dining room with its large glass doors and beheld a sight that caused her to call us all to come quickly and to be quiet. Ten feet away from us in the brand new snow sat a huge immature female Northern Goshawk. She was perched on the still fluttering body of a hen pheasant. As we watched, breast meat and entrails disappeared into her gullet, which grew in size at an astounding rate as the carcass of the pheasant diminished. We tried to piece together what had happened. The snow was unmarked all around the goshawk and her prey. She had obviously killed the pheasant in flight, and it had dropped into the snow, where she alighted on it. Only fifteen feet away, the body of *another* hen pheasant had pitched into the snow and moved no more than two feet before it died and lay still. And . . . inches away from the glass of our window, in a large lilac bush, lay the still body of one of the lovely cock pheasants we had enjoyed watching. There did not seem to be a mark on it. A drop of blood dripped from the opened beak.

Later, a careful examination of the scene revealed that the cock had been hit in midair, and his body had thumped onto the roof of the house, then rolled over several times, and pitched into the bushes. The second hen pheasant must have been taken suddenly and cleanly in the air and fallen mortally wounded. We concluded that the goshawk had flushed the flock of pheasants while they were feeding or crossing the yard. There were no tracks in the fresh snow for at least thirty yards around. The goshawk must have then made three clean and almost instantaneous kills within a matter of seconds, dropping all three birds no more than twenty feet apart.

After fifteen minutes of eating, the goshawk flew away, leaving two birds untouched. At dark, we retrieved the cock pheasant, and I performed an autopsy, carefully removing every feather.

I could find only a few tiny puncture wounds in the bird's back, and the intestines showed slight signs of hemorrhage. We left the second hen undisturbed in the snow and hoped that the hawk would return the next morning. She did not, and that bird was also added to our larder. After aging in the refrigerator a few days, the birds were eaten at our dining room table only a few feet away from where one of nature's most magnificent predators dropped them.

Few hunters have had the thrill of a clean triple. I wonder how often a goshawk has performed such a feat. Evidently these birds are noted for their ability to kill game in excess of their needs at any particular time. We can certainly be witness to that. Our pheasant flock is now down to one cock and ten hens - and is much less in evidence. We hope that the goshawk will remain in the area. However, we hope she turns her attention to the pigeons, starlings, Blue Jays, and Mourning Doves, in the future.

Bryant Barnard, M.D., Wenham

Sailing with an Osprey.

The first weekend in October was chosen as the time we would bring our boat back from Ebenecock Harbor, Maine, to its home port in Marblehead, Massachusetts. On Saturday morning we left Portland, which we had reached the day before, and encountered fog, rain, a lot of wind, and very rough seas all day.

Late in the afternoon we were sailing about six miles offshore approaching York, still in rough seas and twenty-five to thirty knots of southeasterly wind. I was facing aft and was aware of two birds flying at a distance astern of us, but stalking us, and I assumed they were gulls. In a while one proceeded to follow us much more closely, and we instantly realized from its appearance that it was an osprey. He surveyed us from astern and from alongside at a distance of about ten feet. Then he became more adventurous and attempted to land on our back stay - not an easy accomplishment since the boat was moving around a lot in the rough conditions. After five or six tries, he finally managed to hook his talons around the stay and remained there for a minute or two, maintaining his balance with his wings outspread. When he left, his talon tore a corner out of the flag on our "tall buoy," the rescue pole thrown over to mark the location of a man overboard. He was gone for a few minutes and returned to land on the port spreader, which was wet and slippery. He slid on the spreader from the mast out to the shrouds and part way back as the boat rolled from side to side.

After another brief departure, he came back and hovered - again with outstretched wings - about one foot above and two or three feet behind the head of my husband who was at the helm. I was terrified that he was going to land on his head, come sit in my

lap, or, even worse, go down the companionway into the cabin and there feel trapped. His wingspread was close to five feet, and he studied us carefully with a menacing look. His hooked beak, black-encircled eyes, and sharp talons were not characteristic of what one would call a pretty bird - but rather a scary one.

Again, he flew off, only to return and land at the end of the boom. As before, he made several attempts before he accomplished it, since we had a following sea, encountered after we rounded York Ledge Buoy and headed in the last five or six miles toward Kittery. He was very persistent. He hooked one talon into the metal eye connecting the topping lift to the boom and was able to hold his position by spreading out his wings, still eyeing us carefully, about eight feet away. When he went to fly again, his talon was briefly caught in the metal eye and he lost his balance, bounced off the main sheet, and then ditched in the water astern of us. I could not believe he was seriously hurt, but he was in the water about a minute. We could not actually see him because of the big seas but knew where he was since six gulls appeared from nowhere the minute he fell in, and they circled above him. I suppose they were waiting for him to drown or die. Finally, we saw him fly very briefly and then fall back into the water. After another pause, he was airborne again and appeared to be fine. He returned once more and perched at the end of the boom, again with wings outspread. His earlier difficulty was obviously not a deterrent. He had no problem when he finally flew away and headed for the York Ledge Buoy where he settled. That was the last we saw of him, and we wondered what happened to him.

The whole episode lasted about fifteen to twenty minutes, and it was a unique and puzzling experience. We are curious as to why he followed us and why he kept landing on the boat. The buoy would have been a safer resting place if that's what he was seeking. Of course, he did hitch a few rides on the way to the buoy. He had not been blown out to sea because the wind was from the wrong direction. Was he hungry? What attraction did we have for him?

We don't know the answers but only know that it was an unforgettable portion of an otherwise miserable day.

Suzanne S. Connolly, Marblehead

THE WINNER

The winner of the 1985 AT A GLANCE CONTEST for correctly identifying three of the six photos - and notifying us of his identifications - is OLIVER KOMAR. The PRIZE is a \$25 certificate to be used with any of Bird Observer's advertisers.

CONGRATULATIONS, OLLIE!