

TO TALK OF MANY THINGS: Athene cunicularia,
REGAL FRITILLARIES, THE TROPICBIRD, AND
OTHER RARITIES

by Dorothy R. Arvidson, Arlington

On July 17, 1986, at 8:30 A.M., the first call of the day on 259-9500 reached Cindy McElwain of the Natural History Services at Massachusetts Audubon. The caller was Peter Vickery. There was a Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) at the Edgartown-Katama Airfield on Martha's Vineyard! Shortly thereafter, the machinery for informing the public of another rare bird in the state began to move. Calls to the Vineyard ascertained the position of the owl, how accessible to viewing, the possibilities of parking, ferry schedules, etc. - all the information needed for a Voice of Audubon alert. Richard Forster got busy with a Public Service Information sheet.

Disquieting news came midmorning in a call from a reporter preparing an article for *The Vineyard Gazette*. Was the Society aware that the owl had selected for its island stay a stretch of grassland habitat, the plants of which were being carefully monitored this summer by Nature Conservancy ecologists and that the airfield, where the owl perched, was situated within this ecologically valuable tract? The Conservancy was called and this was confirmed. The area was being studied. Furthermore, it was an important stronghold of the Regal Fritillary (*Speyeria idalia* Drury), a butterfly that is becoming very rare and restricted due its vanishing grassland habitat. An additional, fairly major problem now surfaced: how to safeguard people and aircraft if birders, unfamiliar with the hazards of the area, should stray onto the airfield in an effort to get a better look at this rare bird.

A dilemma emerged - one that is becoming increasingly familiar to conservation organizations: how to accommodate the public to permit maximum enjoyment and appreciation of wildlife and still avoid accidents, intrusion on private property, or any lasting damage to fragile environments and threatened species. This is a very sticky problem when the public comprises enthusiastic birdwatchers who often are among the staunchest supporters of the organizations watching over the environment and wildlife.

A decision was reached. The presence of the owl would not be announced on the Voice, even though *The Vineyard Gazette* would publish the following week the news of the bird's arrival. The bird experts felt confident that the owl was here for a prolonged stay, that birders would discover it soon enough, but that the flood of people usually brought into the field by a Voice announcement could be avoided. Thus, the Burrowing Owl (seventh state record) settled in comfortably at the Edgartown airfield, undisturbed and unharassed, and (as Dick Forster has suggested) may have feasted occasionally upon the Regal Fritillaries in the grasslands that the Nature Conservancy was committed to protecting.

Is it truly possible that birders walking carefully through a field to look at an owl can endanger the existence of butterflies dancing about in the air above the grasses? Let us consider the life history of *S. idalia*. From June to September, the orange-brown, white-spotted adults with velvety, blue-black hindwings feed on the nectar of thistle and milkweed flowers and before the end of their summertime existence lay their eggs on grassland plants, usually near a clump of violets. The young hatch and feed actively at night on various species of violets, hiding away by day somewhere in the grasses away from the food plant. The larvae then hibernate over winter in the same area, completing development into flying adults throughout the summer months of the following year. The prospect of tens, possibly hundreds, of eager birders searching randomly through the grass for a ground-dwelling bird posed a very real threat to the Regal Fritillary as well as to the Conservancy's grassland studies.

Then, on September 15, a Red-billed Tropicbird appeared at Gay Head on the Vineyard - a first state record! Inevitably, the visiting birders discovered that a Burrowing Owl was also present but were persuaded (apparently successfully) by the locals to use caution in approaching the bird and to avoid harassing it. The upshot was that the owl was still present on October 3, perched at its customary spot, evidently undisturbed by three weeks and two weekends of heavy birding activity.

This little ten-inch owl with the very long legs is a Western Hemisphere bird who inhabits deserts, prairies, open treeless country, and airfields. *A. cunicularia* lives in burrows (which it excavates itself) that may be ten feet long and as much as three feet below the surface - a prodigious job of digging for a tiny bird. At times, the owl usurps the holes of prairie dogs or ground squirrels, shaping these habitations to fit its needs - the only North American owl to live underground (excepting Barn Owls who occasionally live in holes in cliffs). These owls may be gregarious, a dozen pairs occupying the same two or three acres. They may hunt by day but are usually seen perched upon a low elevation such as a rock, fence post, wires, or the roof of a low building. Our bird often perched on or hid under a dismantled aircraft wing near an airport taxiway. They fly about at dusk and hunt through the night, feeding on insects, rodents, snakes, and amphibia.

The western subspecies, *A. c. hypugea* (the Massachusetts vagrants that have been identified all belong to this group), is found from the West Coast and coastal islands eastward to south-central Manitoba and south through the Midwest into South America but is migratory only in the northern part of its range. A second subspecies, *A. c. floridana*, is a nonmigratory resident of Florida, the Bahamas, the Keys, and Cuba but has been recorded in Long Island, North Carolina, and Connecticut as a vagrant. Massachusetts records include a specimen taken in May 1875 at Newburyport, a report from Amesbury in February 1942, three reports in 1980 - Plymouth in May, Monomoy in June, and Katama on Martha's Vineyard

from July 12 to October 1, and in May 1982 at Northampton. The 1986 owl may be the same bird that appeared at Katama in 1980, a not improbable thought since several vagrants have been known to return to the same area year after year, and this species is on record as surviving for as long as eleven years.

In addition to the Burrowing Owl, three northern owls of circum-polar distribution occur as infrequent vagrants in the state: the Northern Hawk-Owl (*Surnia ulula*), the Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*), and the Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*). The Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) is not a rarity in Massachusetts but a winter resident. In the last century, all of these appeared in the state in greater numbers than is true today.

The Northern Hawk-Owl is a diurnal hunter who frequents half-open woods, parklands, and spruce-tamarack bogs, often perches in open treetops, and is therefore easy to see. This species has appeared in the state only five times in the present century: at Ipswich and Wakefield in November 1927 (different birds), at Greenfield in February 1946, at Concord in November 1958 to January 1959, and at Hinsdale in January to March 1965.

The Great Gray Owl is a forest denizen who hunts rodents, rabbits, squirrels, shrews, moles, and small birds either diurnally or at night in its normal range in the timbered regions of the North or of the higher elevations in the West. In recent times, this species has appeared in Massachusetts at Gill in January to March 1973, at Andover in January 1977, in January to March of 1979 (when there was a major incursion with seventeen records in this state and seventy-nine elsewhere in New England), at Oakham in February 1980, and at Hadley in February to March 1984.

Boreal Owls have occurred in heavy irruptions in the first quarter of this century (in 1922-23, a total of eighty-six were "taken" in New England, thirty of them in Massachusetts), but there have been only four records since then: Belmont in February 1942, Salisbury in December 1978, Back Bay in Boston in November 1983, and Chatham in January 1984. Truly nocturnal, this small forest-dwelling owl hunts mice, insects, and small birds only at night and hides during the day in thick foliage or, in the cold of winter, in abandoned igloos (!) or in barns. Therefore, it is seldom seen by birders, and there may be more of them about than can be projected from the records.

Compared with our resident species, these vagrant northern owls are fairly approachable; therefore, birders should show restraint. For satisfactory owl sightings, familiarize yourself with owl voices and keep in mind several things: (1) the habitat of the species; (2) what is its prey; (3) when is it hunting; and (4) most important for the continued health of the owl, when is it resting. It is true that as enlightened birdwatchers, we no longer hunt owls or even "take" specimen vagrants, but we do press them in order to get a closer look or picture. The life of a predator is "terrible hard," say the experts, and it behooves us to keep our distance from these wonderful hunters, neither disturbing the bird or its prey nor disrupting its habitat.



Great Gray Owl
Hadley, MA February 1984

Photo by Margaret Ciccarelli

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