

Boreal Owls Nesting in New Hampshire

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On the morning of Sunday, July 29, 2001, Rob Sawyer was hiking with his son near the summit of Mount Pierce in the Presidential Range of the White Mountains in New Hampshire when he came across an adult Boreal Owl perched along the side of the trail. He and his son approached to within ten feet of the bird several times for about ten minutes while the bird flew short distances down the trail. Fortunately, Rob reported the sighting with a description of the bird and the exact location to the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, and this information was then forwarded to the New Hampshire e-mail bird list.

Six days later, on August 4, I followed up on this report, with the slim hope of finding what would be an incredible summer record of Boreal Owl. Weighed down by a backpack stuffed with my tent, sleeping bag, food, tape recorder, flashlights, and my video recorder, I made the long hike up to the location where the bird was reported. During the afternoon, I searched the area, but could not find any Boreal Owls. I did, however, get great looks at a family of Spruce Grouse and several Gray Jays who enjoyed copious amounts of my trail mix. After a spectacular sunset through ominous clouds, I waited until dark, and at about 9:00 p.m., after playing a taped call of Boreal Owl for about fifteen minutes, a *juvenile* Boreal Owl flew in and perched a short distance down the trail. As it hopped from branch to branch within thirty feet of me, I was able to get some great looks with a flashlight and was able to get a couple of minutes of nice video before a strong lightning storm moved in and forced me back to my tent. I did not see or hear any other owls but this young bird. The bird was clearly a juvenile, but was a strong flyer and was starting to molt into an adult facial pattern. The habitat where I saw the bird was krummholz fir with a few spruce at about 4100 feet elevation. Most trees were less than twenty feet high.



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Subsequent searches over the next two weeks provided several other birders with observations of at least two juvenile Boreal Owls from this same location, and one more sighting of an adult. A final report was received for an adult Boreal Owl in the same area on October 23.

Remarkably, this was not the only record for Boreal Owl this summer in New England. In Vermont, Brandt Ryder, Kent McFarland, Jim Tietz, and Al Strong had an adult Boreal Owl fly into a mist net while they were banding Bicknell's Thrushes!

The bird was subsequently heard calling into mid-June on Stratton Mountain in Vermont; however, searchers in July could not find the bird and there was never any clear nesting evidence (A. Strong and K. McFarland, pers. comm.).

Boreal Owl sightings are quite rare in New Hampshire. In fact, according to *New Hampshire Bird Records*, there are only five records of Boreal Owl in the state since 1950 and only one record since 1970. All of these records occurred from late fall into early spring, and three of the reports were of the remains of dead birds. Elsewhere in New England, Boreal Owls are also quite rare or at least rarely encountered during migration and winter. Their quiet, nocturnal behavior and propensity to roost in dense evergreens makes their presence difficult to detect.

Historically, summer records of Boreal Owls are essentially nonexistent for New England. The known breeding range of Boreal Owl in eastern North America is limited to southern and central Quebec and northern New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. According to *The Atlas of Breeding Birds of the Maritime Provinces* (Erskine



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1992), Boreal Owls have been confirmed nesting as far south as Grand Manan Island in New Brunswick during the 1920s and early 1930s, but have not been recorded there since. The only prior summer record for New England that I have found is for a bird near the summit of General Stark Mountain in Vermont on July 18, 1923 (Bent 1961). The New Hampshire

sightings of two fledged juvenile Boreal Owls, and at least one adult, appear to provide the first documented evidence for Boreal Owls nesting in the eastern United States.

The question now remains: is this nest record the result of an incursion of Boreal Owls from the previous winter, or have the Boreal Owls always nested in small densities in the boreal forests of northern New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine? Evidence from Quebec suggests that the fall of 2000 was an irruptive fall for Boreal Owls. At Tadoussac, a banding station located along the St. Lawrence River a little over 100 miles northeast of Quebec City, 113 Boreal Owls were banded, according to *North American Birds* (Bannon et al. 2001). According to Samuel Denault (pers. comm.), this was a record high, and contrasts sharply with zero birds banded in the years 1997-1999! Judy Walker banded one Boreal Owl during the fall at her owl-

banding station in Freeport, Maine, but according to Norm Smith (pers. comm.), none were captured by Danielle Smith at her owl-banding station in Massachusetts. A Boreal Owl made a one-day appearance in downtown Boston on October 21, 2000; however, according to *North American Birds* (Ellison and Martin 2001), no subsequent winter records were reported anywhere in New England.

The nesting may just be a coincidental event, triggered by an incursion of owls and an abundance of food in northern New England; however, it also seems plausible that these birds have nested in northern New England all along, perhaps in low densities in deep stands of boreal forests. In fact, Gregory and Patricia Hayward, in *The Birds of North America* (Hayward and Hayward 1993), suggest that the Boreal Owl's nesting range probably extends into northern New England. The bird's secretive nocturnal behavior and inaccessible nesting areas make the species difficult to detect. Our knowledge of the nesting range of Boreal Owls in central and western United States has also changed dramatically in the last forty years, with the discovery of overlooked populations in several states where the owl was not previously known to nest. These sightings from northern New England just add more pieces to the puzzle! 🦉

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