

Notes from the OBRC

by
Rob Dobos

At the time of writing this column, the 1996 OBRC members are still busy reviewing reports of provincial rarities submitted during 1996. The work of the Committee will continue in earnest leading to the annual meeting at the end of March, at which time final decisions will be made on any records still under review. About 140 records will have been considered by the 1996 Committee, which is down from the number reviewed in 1995.

Other activities that the OBRC has recently been involved with include assistance in the revision to the Ontario bird checklist to be printed this spring by OFO and FON, as well as updating and reprinting the Provincial Review List of species, a copy of which has been included with this mailing.

Two members are finishing their terms on the OBRC as of the annual meeting. They are Kevin McLaughlin and Alan Wormington. I am thankful to both of them for their hard work, and their helpful support during my first stint as Secretary. The new members joining the Committee in 1997 are Ron Tozer and Richard Knapton. Ron Tozer, who lives in Dwight and is supposedly now retired, was the park naturalist at Algonquin Provincial Park for many years. He has served twice previously on the OBRC from 1988-90 and 1992-94. Richard Knapton lives in Fonthill, and is currently the Research Director of the Long Point Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Fund. This will be his second term on the OBRC, having served previously from 1991-94. The other members on the 1997 Committee are Margaret Bain, David Brewer, Peter Burke, Nick Escott and Don Sutherland. The Chair of this year's Committee will be selected at the upcoming annual meeting. I will be continuing as Secretary in 1997.

Once again, I encourage you to send your reports of provincial rarities to the OBRC, even if you were not the finder of a particular bird. Do not assume that someone else will document a rarity, as every year, rare birds that were seen by numerous observers go undocumented. Send your rare bird reports directly to me:
Rob Dobos, Secretary OBRC, 1156 5th Concession Rd. W., RR 2, Waterdown ON L0R 2H2 E-mail: rob.dobos@ec.gc.ca

Owls and Snow

Why northern forest owls invade the south
by Ron Pittaway

This fall and winter have been fabulous for seeing Northern Hawk Owls and Boreal Owls in southern Ontario. Last year, we had perhaps the largest southward movement of Great Gray Owls on record, followed by a good echo flight this winter.

Why do northern forest owls invade the south from time to time? We often read and hear that "they were forced south by deep snow in the north that prevented them from catching voles and mice." This deep snow and owl myth has persisted a long time with birders, especially among those of us living south of the snow belt. Just like Snowy Owls come south when lemming populations crash, northern forest owls move south too when vole numbers crash.

Snow is a protective layer for northern plant and animal species. Their life cycles are dependent on cold weather and deep snow. Most years see the boreal forest deep in snow and if prey populations are high, the owls stay on territory. Sometimes we hear about crusts forming on top of deep snow following a mid-winter thaw or rain. Do crusts prevent northern owls from catching prey? Crusts may actually help owls find prey! A metre below the snow surface at ground level, the temperature is above freezing; bacterial decomposition of dead leaves and plants goes on all winter. This decay releases carbon dioxide gas which is trapped under the crust. The buildup of CO₂ gas agitates the voles and causes other behavioural changes, forcing voles to the surface and out through openings into the talons of waiting owls!

Northern forest owls, cold temperatures, deep snow, crusts and voles are part of the boreal forest ecosystem in winter. Great Gray, Boreal and Northern Hawk Owls are adapted to cold and snow. Extreme cold, deep snow and crusts do not force northern owls south, but the lack of food does.

Ross's Goose Bird Quiz Correction

The number of bird species currently known to nest only in Canada is now down to two: Whooping Crane (formerly bred in the United States) and Harris's Sparrow! In the Bird Quiz in the October 1996, 14(3), issue of *OFO NEWS*, Hugh Currie asked what *three* species nest only in Canada.

Ron Ridout e-mailed *OFO NEWS* with information that "Ross's Geese have bred in Alaska in the Sagavanirktok River delta (east of Prudhoe Bay). The first nest was found in 1984 and written up in the *Condor* 89:665-667 by Steve Johnson and Declan Troy...I spoke with Steve Johnson about it and he said that there really has been only the one confirmed nest though the species has been observed on several occasions since in breeding season in Snow Goose colonies both in Alaska and on Wrangel Island in Russia. He and others strongly suspect breeding is taking place, but with the remoteness of some of the Snow Goose colonies in Alaska and the lack of resources to check them (Steve's banding program ended a few years ago) there's no way of knowing the present status of Ross's Geese in northeastern Alaska...with the big increase in their numbers in Canada, there is a very good chance that they are breeding in Alaska..."



Northern Hawk Owl by Sam Barone