

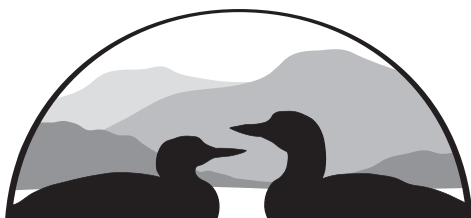
# New Hampshire Bird Records



**Spring 2008**

**Vol. 27, No. 1**

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## **Volume 27, Number 1**

### **Spring 2008**

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**Cover Photos:** Ross's Goose in flight above Durham Town Landing by Scott Young, 3/30/08, Durham, NH. Ross's Goose walking in Moore fields on Rt. 155A by Scott Young, 3/29/08, Durham, NH.

*New Hampshire Bird Records (NHBR)* is published quarterly by New Hampshire Audubon. Bird sightings are submitted by volunteer observers and edited for publication. All rarity records are subject to review by the New Hampshire Rare Birds Committee and publication of reports here does not imply future acceptance by the committee. A computerized printout of all sightings in a season is available for a fee. To order a printout, purchase back issues, or submit your sightings, contact the Managing Editor, or visit our web site.

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IN MEMORY OF  
*Patricia Bruns*

**T**his issue of New Hampshire Bird Records with its color cover is sponsored by the family and friends of Patricia Bruns. Patricia was a strong supporter of NH Audubon, serving as Executive Councilor throughout the 1970s, and sustaining a deep interest in birds and conservation.



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tions of birds recorded moving north over Plum Island in Massachusetts, approximately 7 miles to the south, support this assumption. Rather strong westerly winds were present on all our counts, which likely helped to concentrate the movement of birds toward the coastline.

It is difficult to draw any significant conclusions based on our limited data, although they do illustrate some interesting results, including the magnitude and timing of coastal migration for a few species. The American Goldfinch migration may be the most interesting. Rick Heil has recorded coastal migration of goldfinches in past springs at Plum Island, but these reports appear to represent a rarely seen event that is not well documented. The migration we witnessed was a consistent movement of flocks of bounding goldfinches moving northward at very low elevations, just over the housetops along Rte. 1A. The flocks generally ranged in size from 10 to 30 birds, but some flocks numbered up to 75 or more.

Large migrations of Blue Jays have been noted historically in New Hampshire; however, our counts represent some of the higher numbers recorded in many years. A great migration of American Kestrels and Northern Harriers occurred in mid-April, and the movement of blackbirds on the same day was also noteworthy, with large numbers of Brown-headed Cowbirds and Common Grackles migrating northward in small flocks, just above rooftops and following the course of Rte. 1A.

## Spotlight on Northern Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*)



Northern Hawk Owl by Mark Suomala,  
12/30/02, Tamworth, NH.

by Robert Fox

### Background

The Northern Hawk Owl is a member of the family *Strigidae* (Typical Owls). Because it is a big owl with a long tail somewhat like a hawk, it has been called a Hawk Owl. It lives in the boreal areas across Eurasia and North America, where it breeds from Alaska to Newfoundland and southern Labrador. In some winters when food is scarce, it wanders south. It is a rare and irregular fall and winter visitor in New Hampshire.

### Breeding Status

The Northern Hawk Owl occupies forest tundra, but seeks edges, clearings, and sparse woodland, where it hunts voles and occasionally small birds. It breeds from

March to September, living in tree cavities and old raptor nests. Unlike most owls, the Hawk Owl hunts by day and tends to perch on the tops of trees, poles, or haystacks, so it is easily seen if present. When it leaves its perch it flies low over the fields hunting rodents before sailing up to a new perch somewhat like a shrike. It is particularly fearless and can be approached for good observation.

**Occurrence in New Hampshire**

The biggest incursion on record was during 1884 and 1885, with the first record from Colebrook on April 20, 1884. William Brewster collected four near Lake Umbagog (October 25 and 31 and November 15 and 16, 1884). Mr. Wright wrote, in an account from the Jefferson region, “shot one bird in Lancaster (November 19, 1884) and Mr. Norton of Colebrook found them most common.” Norton, writing to Allen on December 1, 1884, said, “they came three weeks ago in greater numbers than ever known before. Farmers’ sons have been killing them all over the country.” Other early records include those from Webster (two shot, another seen in 1884), Washington (1886), Grafton (October 12, 1889), Exeter (December 25, 1902), near Dublin (late November 1905), near Mt. Chocorua (shot November 6, 1926), Bath (March 4, 1942), and Chester (shot November 9, 1945).

More recently (1950–2006), at least 14 Northern Hawk Owls have been reported in New Hampshire (Table 1). The last three reports include some fascinating stories and illustrate the differences in behavior of this species in New Hampshire. All reports show the birds in fairly open country (dead trees in a swamp, open field edge or airport), where they perch during the day on tall trees and are easily seen. Sometimes the bird is seen for only several hours or a day and few people get to see it, as in the 2002 bird in Tamworth. In other cases, the bird(s) remain for many days and are seen by hundreds of birders and photographers, as in the 2000–01 owl at Whitefield Airport, which was present for 78 days. At that time it was said over 1,800 people from 20 states and four countries came to observe; some even brought mice to feed the owl so he would stay.

**Table 1.** Northern Hawk Owl records in New Hampshire, 1950–2006.

Date	Location
Nov. 20, 1958	Pittsburg
Dec. 21, 1961–Jan. 26, 1962	Laconia
Dec. 30, 1964	Laconia
Dec. 17, 1965 (shot)	Northumberland
Dec. 28, 1965	Littleton
Dec. 1965–Feb. 1966 (shot)	Lancaster
Jan. 5 - Mar. 24, 1969	Littleton
Jan. 28–Mar. 25, 1973	Gilford
Jan. 26, 1974	Wilton
Mar. 1, 1978	Newmarket
Nov. 9, 1991	Stewartstown, Creampoke Rd.
Dec. 1, 2000 for several weeks	Jefferson Meadows
Dec. 2, 2000–Feb. 19, 2001	Whitefield Airport
Dec. 29–30, 2002	Tamworth, Jackman Pond

Of the 33 reports in New Hampshire, three were in October, six in November, ten in December, five in January, four in February, four in March and one in April. Most owls were seen for 1–3 days, but we don't always know how long the birds were present before being reported. In five examples mentioned above, birds stayed in one location for 36–78 days; food must have been plentiful.

## Comments

It is a great birding experience to find, or even see, a Northern Hawk Owl. In New Hampshire before 1890 there was the big invasion of 1884–85 along with two other reports, plus several others in the early 20th century. In Massachusetts there were 24 documented records before 1890 and only five from 1900–93. It is hard to explain why they are far less common now than in the mid 19th century.

What is surprising but typical of these irruptions of northern owls (Hawk, Great Gray, Boreal) is the localized area where they occur. There was a huge incursion in southern Canada and parts of northern United States in 2000–01. In addition to the two in northern New Hampshire, there were 209 in Quebec, but only 18 in New York and Nova Scotia. Such irruptions are believed to be caused by a sudden lack of winter food in the birds' normal territories; birds found dead often appear to have been starving. The birds probably keep moving from one location to another in search of food and, when a good supply of mice is found, they remain until it is time to head north, in late March or April.

An interesting technicality shows how our Northern Hawk Owl relates to other owls. Linnaeus named the bird in 1758 when developing his list of all the birds; probably he used the long tail and large size to call it a Hawk Owl. However, DNA research and other discoveries now divide the Typical Owl family into three subfamilies and six tribes (smaller divisions of a subfamily). Our Northern Hawk Owl now is grouped with 37 other small owls called Pygmy-owls and owlets, most of which live in warm climates and are not found in a circumpolar distribution.

## Data Sources

The following data sources were searched for records of this species. The data for all figures represent the number of records; duplicates are not included. Not all records presented here have been reviewed by the New Hampshire Rare Birds Committee.

*New Hampshire Bird Records* and archives, circa 1950–2006. New Hampshire Audubon, Concord, New Hampshire.

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*Bob Fox, a life long birder, has spent one to three months in New Hampshire nearly every year since he was ten. Bob birded extensively with Bob Smart from the late 1940s through the 1970s and they planned to write a book on New Hampshire birds. Today Bob is helping Allan Keith realize this idea. Bob and Dana Duxbury-Fox summer in Tuftonboro and live in North Andover, Massachusetts.*

## Backyard Birder

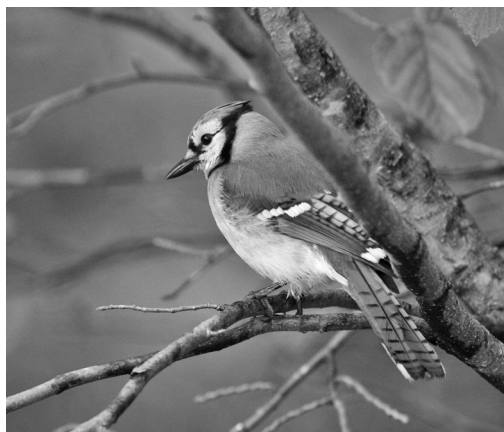
### Blue Jay Behavior

by Brenda Sens

We tend to take Blue Jays for granted. Sometimes we hear them praised because of their early warnings of danger; sometimes we hear complaints because these same warnings are used to frighten smaller birds away from feeders, clearing the decks for the Blue Jays themselves; sometimes Blue Jay reports take the form of loathing because they are chipping away at the paint on house windows—an action that is thought to be the result of their need for fairly large amounts of calcium in their diet. It was, therefore, very exciting to get not one, but two reports of a different kind of Blue Jay behavior.

In late spring, Dr. James Powers of Hillsborough reported seeing a Blue Jay sitting on a small branch, pushing down with his feet so that it and the branch bobbed up and down in a rhythmic motion. A second Blue Jay watched closely from an adjacent branch about a foot away. The bobbing bird seemed to expect a response from the other bird. When none occurred, the first bird bobbed again and the second bird flew off.

As if this were not interesting enough, another report arrived from Barb Horton of Derry concerning Blue Jay behavior. In mid-February she witnessed over twenty Blue Jays “dancing” in a willow tree. The dance consisted of the birds “standing on their



*Blue Jay in tree by Mary Fran Loggans,  
5/15/08, Frankestown, NH.*