

ONTARIO BIRDS

VOLUME 30 NUMBER 1
APRIL 2012
PAGES 1—64

ARTICLES

- 2 Colonial Waterbird Populations at the Leslie Street Spit/Tommy Thompson Park
By Karen McDonald
- 13 “Vega” Herring Gull in Algoma District:
A new taxon for Ontario
By Kirk Zufelt
- 26 Early History of the Great Gray Owl
in the New and Old World
By Heimo Mikkola and Alan Sieradzki
- 30 eBird: a proposed provincial standard for
regional bird recordkeeping
By Mike V.A. Burrell
- 36 Spring migration of Great Egrets into Ontario:
an eBird analysis
By D. V. Chip Weseloh and Tyler Hoar
- 48 Changes in Summer Abundance and Distribution
of Mute Swans along the Lower Great Lakes of Ontario,
1986 – 2011
*By Shawn W. Meyer, Shannon S. Badzinski, Michael L. Schummer
and Christopher M. Sharp*

Cover Illustration *by Barry Kent MacKay*

ISSN 0822-3890

Publications Mail Agreement No. 40046348

Early History of the Great Gray Owl in the New and Old World

Heimo Mikkola and Alan Sieradzki



Figure 1. Anders Sparman's illustration (circa 1789) of the Old World subspecies of the Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa lapponica*).

Strix Lapponica

THINK OF THE TAXONOMIC HISTORY of Holarctic birds and one would be excused in automatically thinking of the work of renowned 18th and 19th century European naturalists, such as Carl von Linné (Linnaeus), Carl Peter Thunberg or Per Gustaf Lindroth. Yet very few people realize that one of the most iconic of all Holarctic species, the Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*), was originally described and named from a specimen collected in Ontario and that the very first published record of a Great Gray Owl nest anywhere in the world was that of a nest also discovered in Canada.

The Great Gray Owl is one of the few owls living right across the globe in the Holarctic forest belt. The average population in Europe (including Russia east to the Ural Mountains) is estimated to be only 4,400 pairs (Mebs and Scherzinger 2008). It is clear that the North American population far exceeds that of Europe with an estimated population of 20,000 – 70,000 breeding pairs (Duncan 1997).

In 1966, when we started the Great Gray Owl studies in the University of Oulu, Finland, this owl was believed to be one of the rarest owls in the world and definitely the rarest in Europe (Mebs 1966). The rarity of the Great Gray Owl in the Old World was obviously a major contributing factor as to why the famous Swedish taxonomist Carl von Linné failed to describe it from Northern Europe while being able to describe the

Northern Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*), Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*), Eurasian Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo*), Common Scops Owl (*Otus scops*), Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*), Eurasian Pygmy Owl (*Glaucidium passerinum*), Boreal [Tengmalm's] Owl (*Aegolius funereus*) and Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*) by 1758.

The population of the Great Gray Owl being historically much greater in North America than in Europe must, therefore, also be viewed as a major factor in the explanation as to why *Strix nebulosa nebulosa* was first described by Johann Reinhold Forster (1772) from a specimen collected by Andrew Graham, the factor at Severn River, at Fort Severn, Ontario, Canada and that the first Great Gray Owl nest to be recorded anywhere in the world was discovered by Dr. John Richardson at Great Bear Lake in the Northwest Territories, Canada, on 23 May 1826 (Swainson and Richardson 1832:77-78). The Great Gray Owl was also later described from the Hudson Strait region of Canada as *Strix cinerea* by Johann Friedrich Gmelin (1788) but is now treated as a synonym.

In the Old World, *Strix nebulosa lapponica* was officially first described by Carl Peter Thunberg (1798) from Sweden in Kongliga Svenska Vetenskaps-Akademiens nya Handlingar, Stockholm, twenty-six years after Forster's (1772) published description of the nominate *Strix nebulosa nebulosa*. While it seems that Carl von Linné did not

know of the Great Gray Owl, one of his students, Anders Sparrman, attempted to describe *Strix lapponica* when working with skins in the Swedish Museum Carlsonianum in the years 1786 – 1789 but, for some unknown reason, did not complete the work. Sparrman was the first to use the name *Strix lapponica* and painted a large owl with concentric circles in the facial disc and a distinct black moustache, for which the model must surely have been a Great Gray Owl (Figure 1). The specimen that Sparrman worked from certainly must have been collected before 1789, ten years earlier than Thunberg's published description.

John Latham (1790) published the description of a Great Gray Owl from the mountains of eastern Siberia and named it *Strix barbata* (obviously the origin of the German name for the Great Gray Owl: Der Bartkauz). Published eight years earlier than Thunberg's description, the European race of the Great Gray Owl should perhaps be *Strix nebulosa barbata*. However, thanks to the complicated rules of taxonomy and Anders Sparrman's unpublished work and earlier use of the name *lapponica*, Latham's *barbata* has given way to Thunberg's *lapponica* and is treated as a synonym.

The first published record of a nest of a Great Gray Owl from Sweden was from Luleå, North Sweden in 1843 (Löwenhjelm 1844), but some autumn observations were reported from further south in Södermanland in September

1832 and in November 1833 (Stefansson 1997). In the latter mentioned newspaper story, it was reported that Great Gray Owls had been shot in that area some 20-30 years earlier, maybe as early as 1812.

In Finland, the first recorded observations, in spring and early autumn (which could indicate breeding), are from Espoo (near Helsinki) in August 1846 and from Kirkkonummi (also near Helsinki) in April 1858 (Collin 1886). The famous English egg collector, John Wolley, collected eggs from Lapland in the years 1856–1862 from many Great Gray Owl nests (Von Haartman *et al.* 1967).

In the Berlin Museum of Natural History, the first Great Gray Owl specimen was collected just when breeding could have started in March 1832 from Schnecken, Krs. Niederung, (now in northern Poland). This Polish nest was discovered only six years after the first Canadian nest was reported.

While the population of Great Gray Owl has likely always been many times greater in North America than it has in Europe, one cannot take anything away from the outstanding work of Mr. Andrew Graham and Dr. John Richardson, whose overall importance in Canadian ornithological history has been admirably detailed by Houston *et al.* (2003). The fact remains that the original description and naming of the Great Gray Owl and the very first record of a Great Gray Owl nest belongs to Canada.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank C. Stuart Houston for his encouragement and helpful suggestions with the manuscript. The scan of the painting by Anders Sparman was supplied courtesy of Ove Stefansson.

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