

## THE BURROWING OWL IN NEW YORK STATE

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The Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) is represented in North America by two widely separated populations. The migratory subspecies *hypugaea* breeds in the western United States east to Minnesota. The supposedly sedentary race *floridana* occurs in peninsular Florida from Alachua Co. southward (Sykes, 1974) to the Bahamas, Hispaniola (Bond, 1971), and Cuba (Garrido and Garcia Montaña, 1975). In 1973, *A.c. floridana* was discovered breeding in Cuba (Bond, 1973).

In New York State the Burrowing Owl has been reported on three occasions:

(1) Griscom (1923) reports a bird that "flew into an uptown house in New York City, August 8, 1875, and was caught alive." He does not state whether the bird was kept as a specimen, and dismisses the possibility that it was a wild bird, stating "this record is so remarkable, that one instantly suspects an escaped cage bird."

(2) Bull (1974) reports a bird of the race *hypugaea* collected on Long Island at Westhampton, Suffolk Co. October 27, 1950, by Art Cooley, and identified to subspecies by John T. Zimmer. Art Cooley (verb. comm.) told me a friend of his shot the bird at a sandy spoil area a quarter of a mile west of the West Bay Bridge in Westhampton, within sight of the barrier beach. This specimen was placed in the private collection of LeRoy Wilcox. However, the specimen is no longer extant, having been stolen along with the entire collection of Wilcox during a vacation absence (Wilcox, pers. comm.).

(3) On October 27, 1976 Steve Kriss discovered a Burrowing Owl at dusk at Cedar Beach, Suffolk Co., perched atop a low post adjacent to a roadway. As Kriss sat in his car studying the bird, it suddenly flew into nearby beach grass, then returned to the post with a prey item, apparently a large insect. Finally, the bird took flight and disappeared over the Cedar Beach pitch-and-putt golf course. Kriss returned to Cedar Beach on several occasions with his friend Bob Leporati to search for the Burrowing Owl, but to no avail. Rather unfortunately, word of the sighting did not spread far.

On December 27, 1976 T. Rodney Gardner, a visiting birder from Pennsville, New Jersey, discovered a Burrowing Owl roosting under the edge of a row of Japanese Black Pine trees growing along the median strip of Ocean Parkway at Cedar Beach. Gardner immediately

notified Robert Arbib at the National Audubon Society, who in turn alerted the local birding community. That afternoon Mike Gochfeld relocated the bird at this spot, due north of the above-mentioned golf course. The bird stood at the edge of the pines, its feathers fluffed out. The temperature was below 30° F., the winds were NW at about 15-20 mph., and the ground was nearly covered by a recent snowfall. The bird flew short distances several times, usually alighting in the shelter of the pines, but twice perched atop high, exposed branches. Photographs were taken by Rod Gardner, Mike Gochfeld, Paul A. Buckley, the author, and others.

That night two inches of wet snow fell, and by morning the temperature had fallen to 21° F. Shortly after dawn the owl was found "huddled" under the pines. It appeared weak, and only flew short distances. It once alighted on Ocean Parkway and promptly closed its eyes! The bird was obviously ailing and a decision was reached to capture it. This was accomplished by Arthur Richard, who simply walked over and picked it up. An immediate examination revealed that "hardened snow or ice had begun to form on the bird's feet and lower tarsi, and it felt extremely emaciated" (Richard). The bird was taken home by Art and Hannah Richard, who are equipped to care for sick or injured birds, especially raptors. Later that day the owl consumed 6 crickets and 4 dead mice. The next day, December 29th, the bird ate 2 more mice and 4 strips of lean beef. The owl's reactions appeared to have returned to normal. The next morning the first pellet was found in its cage. The Richards suggest that this delay in casting a pellet indicates that the owl was even more starved than they had first imagined (see Richard, 1977).

At this point there were two issues concerning the owl—which race was it, and what should become of the bird once restored to health? Arrangements were made to have it brought to the American Museum of Natural History the following Monday for subspecific determination. On December 30th Tony Lauro telephoned me to convey a "growing" sentiment that the bird should be released in the wild in its native habitat, a feeling later voiced by others. Tony suggested that Mike Cooper, a birder holding an airline ticket for Miami January 5th, would be willing to transport the bird. I consulted John Bull and John Farrand, and we agreed that if the owl was identified as the western race *hypugaea* then it should be donated to the Bronx Zoo and not sent further astray. The corollary was understood, were it *floridana* then to Florida it would go.

The Burrowing Owl was examined by John Bull and John Farrand on January 3, 1977. Farrand's comment (*in litt.*) follows:

"The Burrowing Owl from Cedar Beach, which I examined with John Bull . . . was identifiable as a Florida Burrowing Owl, *A. c. floridana*, on the basis of its small size (wing, 166 mm.; tail, 72 mm.), its darker brown upperparts with whitish, not buffy, spots, its whiter underparts, its rather heavily spotted and only very pale buffy under wing-coverts, and its very sparsely feathered tarsi. Taken together, these characters eliminate not only *A. c. hypugaea* of western North America but all other races of the species . . . .

"When I got the skins out to look at the differences between *floridana* and *hypugaea*, I was struck by the fact that these are very good races. *A. c. hypugaea* is a bigger, paler and more buffy bird with very densely feathered tarsi. There is no doubt at all that the Cedar Beach bird is *floridana*, much to my surprise."



*Burrowing Owl*

*Cedar Beach,*

*Long Island*

*T. H. Davis*

*December 27, 1976*

Arrangements were then made for Mike Cooper to transport the bird to Florida and release it near Miami. At the same time several newspapers were contacted, and human interest photo stories appeared in the *Long Island Press* January 4th, and the *Daily News* and *New York Times* on the 5th. That evening Art and Hannah Rich-

ard brought the owl to Mike Cooper at JFK Airport. Within minutes of Cooper's departure two U.S. Fish and Wildlife special agents appeared, inquiring whether a permit had been obtained to transport the bird interstate. Everyone had neglected to consider this necessity, and the owl was immediately confiscated! With the intercession of Harvey Berman, a National Airlines public relations man, a compromise was reached, and the Burrowing Owl was allowed to fly to Miami where other special agents seized the bird. A follow-up story in the *Daily News* January 6th wryly commented that the owl almost didn't make the flight to Florida since it lacked a permit to "fly"!

On January 6th Paul Sykes was contacted in Delray Beach, Florida. Sykes is an avid birder and is employed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a biologist. With his intercession the red tape was soon dispensed with. Later that week the owl was given to Paul and he released it "in good health" in Burrowing Owl habitat on the mainland west of Hypoluxo Island.

#### DISCUSSION

Disorientation might cause a western, migratory Burrowing Owl to occur in the Northeast, but how a bird of the southern, supposedly sedentary race might reach Long Island is less clear. Newspaper stories referred to above suggested the owl was carried north by auto or train, but this seems implausible. A small, illegal cage bird trade involves only western birds according to Richard Ryan (pers. comm.), and there was nothing about the bird's appearance that hinted at recent captivity.

Paul Sykes stated to me that while Florida Burrowing Owls are considered sedentary, some dispersal obviously does take place. He collected a Florida Burrowing Owl on the Outer Banks of North Carolina at Salvo, Dare Co., on February 14, 1967, that had been present since November 14, 1966 (Sykes, 1974). Sykes' paper cites two other specimens of *A. c. floridana* from outside its normal range, from Alabama and Cuba. He mentions sight reports of undetermined subspecific identity from Virginia and South Carolina both at coastal locations. Two other sight reports were from offshore: a bird boarded a vessel at night just off Cape Henry, Virginia, October 22, 1918, and one flew aboard a boat at 10 a.m. 24 miles east of Cocoa Beach, Florida, July 27, 1972. The latter bird remained aboard until 5 p.m. when the boat docked at Port Canaveral and the bird flew ashore and disappeared. Sykes states that these offshore reports suggest "a possible mechanism by which *A. c. floridana* could readily

reach places along the eastern seaboard of the U.S. far from its normal range. On the southeast coast of Florida the busy coastal shipping lane is within 1-2 km. of shore."

Frederick A. Probst has sent me photographs of a Burrowing Owl taken in June, 1976, at Huntington Beach State Park, South Carolina. John Farrand has examined these photographs and writes: "On the basis of the general coloration and the fact that the tarsi appear largely bare, this bird is almost certainly *A. c. floridana*; it is definitely not the western race *hypugaea*." This additional evidence supports the idea of dispersal by the Florida population.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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