

NOTEWORTHY RECORD OF THE NORTHERN HAWK OWL BREEDING IN SOUTHEASTERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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On 29 June 2006, we observed a group of Northern Hawk Owls (*Surnia ulula*) about 13 km south of Marble Canyon on Highway 93 in Kootenay National Park, British Columbia. The owls were observed at approximately 0930 hr. The sky was sunny with some clouds and the lighting was excellent. We observed the birds for 15 min from a distance of 9 to 15 m using Nikon 8 x 40, and Bausch and Lomb 12 x 32, binoculars. The owls were first seen on the north side of the highway but the majority of our observations were from the south side of the highway, about 100 m off the road.

The first hawk owl was seen on top of a tree alongside the highway. When we stopped to view it a second bird flew in beside it. Both birds were making a rising screeching call, typical of adults, which had the quality of an alarm or distress call. Some of the other owls were making a loud chirping sound, similar to the sound a squirrel, which is typical of fledged young. The plumage of the juveniles was similar to that of the adults but they all had a buff band at the top of the chest below the neck. More calling of both types was heard across the highway and when we went to explore off the road, we saw four birds sitting in various trees between 5 and 9 m off the ground. One bird was observed feeding on some sort of rodent. The birds in the trees either stayed still or flew to neighbouring trees. Other birds were heard calling in the vicinity and flying in and out, including the two that were initially seen. At one time four birds were heard plus two others. The total number of birds was difficult to determine but at least six were accounted for.

The area had been severely burned three years ago and is now dominated by burnt white spruce (*Picea glauca*) and Englemann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*), with some lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *latifolia*) trees and regenerating fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*) and forbs (Figure 1). Northern Hawk



Figure 1. Recently burned white and Englemann spruce forest, with scattered lodgepole pines (*Pinus latifolia*), occupied by the family of Northern Hawk Owls in Kootenay National Park, BC. 29 June 2006 (Valerie Harris).

Owls were regularly seen in the area during the winter in 2004 and 2005.

In British Columbia, the Northern Hawk Owl breeds from Manning Park and Moyie River north throughout the interior to the Yukon Territory border (Campbell et al. 1990). Despite year-round occurrence in the East Kootenay region there are no records for the months of May, June, and July in the Upper Columbia River (Ferguson and Halverson 1997). Within Kootenay National Park, Van Tighem (1977) reports the only other previously known breeding record from the Vermillion Pass burn, which is located near the eastern boundary of the park.

Literature Cited

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About the Authors

Dean is a naturalist living in Cranbrook. He regularly takes part in Christmas Bird Counts and other bird-watching events in the East Kootenay. In addition to birds, Dean studies butterflies, moths, and dragonflies in the East Kootenay.

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