

A Boreal Owl provides an encounter with an elusive species

by Ted Bailey

Although I have conducted research on many interesting species—striped skunks in Ohio, bobcats in Idaho, wolverines in Montana, leopards in South Africa—and have conducted or been involved in studies of moose, caribou, brown bears, wolves, coyotes, lynx, marten, bald eagles, trumpeter swans and wood frogs on the Kenai Peninsula, one of my continuing enjoyments of living on the Kenai Peninsula is the anticipation of seeing a species or some animal behavior that I've never seen before. Each day that I am fortunate to spend time outdoors I know there is that possibility.

I had such an experience late in the evening on September 15. However, I did not encounter a rarely seen wolverine, seldom-seen lynx or even an elusive wolf. But it was a species I had never seen before in its natural habitat even after living here over 32 years!

In near darkness walking through a small patch of forest near our home a robin-sized bird reluctantly flushed from a tree in front of me and landed on a nearby branch. I would not have been able to identify it were it not for my light-gathering binoculars. But once my eyes became adjusted to the dim light, I discovered I was looking at a rarely seen species—a diminutive boreal owl—and it was intently looking back at me.

Although boreal owls apparently are fairly common in our boreal forests they are seldom seen. First, they are very small, the heavier females weighing only about 6.4 ounces and the males about 3.8 ounces. They are only eight to nine inches long with a wingspan from 21-24 inches. Years ago I heard the plaintive calls of one in the distance off Swan Lake Road near Campfire Lake but despite looking for it, I never saw it. I even helped restore to health an injured boreal owl that we kept several weeks at the Refuge Headquarters before releasing it into the wild, but I never encountered one in its natural habitat.

The boreal owl I saw in September seemed as interested in me as I was in it. It flushed ahead of me from a low spruce branch and flew about thirty feet to a willow tree facing me and rocked its head several

times for a better view. After five minutes it flew directly toward me just clearing my head and landed on a birch limb behind me, closely inspecting me again. After several minutes it flew toward me again, this time landing only about fifteen feet away about six feet above the ground. And while watching the owl this time, it appeared to regurgitate something that fell to the ground.

Finally the tiny owl flew off into the darkness of the nearby spruce trees. Assuming I would not see it again, I began to walk away, but as I was leaving the owl appeared from behind me, flew low past me and disappeared ahead of me into the darkness. Returning the next day I found a tiny one-inch pellet it had regurgitated that contained the remains of what I believe was a red-backed vole.

There have been few studies of boreal owls. Perhaps the most detailed study was that conducted by researchers from the University of Idaho in the 1980s. It was based on radio tagged boreal owls in the Northern Rocky Mountains of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. Most (75%) boreal owls there nested at altitudes greater than 5,196 feet and had large home ranges for such small birds: an average of 3,585 acres in the winter and 2,921 acres in the summer. They fed mainly on small mammals such as voles, flying squirrels, pocket gophers, chipmunks, and jumping mice.

The boreal owls in the Northern Rocky Mountains nested high above ground in the cavities of trees that had been excavated by pileated woodpeckers. Boreal owls hunt from low perches at night, seldom hunt during the daytime and occasionally cache in the forks of trees their small mammal prey to eat later.

Boreal owls on the Kenai Peninsula begin establishing their territories and start to breed from about March through April. Their call is a soft and rapidly repeated “po-po-po-po”.

I feel fortunate to have finally seen a boreal owl in its natural habitat and to have heard them call. But most of all, its reassuring just to know that they are really out there even if they are rarely seen.

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Department of Fish and Game's website at: <http://www.adfg.state.ak.us/pubs/notebook/bird/borealow.php>. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.