

## A WEST COAST RECORD OF A JUVENILE BOREAL OWL

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**Abstract** -- A recently fledged Boreal Owl in Garibaldi Provincial Park provides one of the few documented breeding records in British Columbia and the first in west coast mountains.

**Key words:** *Aegolius funereus*, Boreal Owl, Breeding Range, Garibaldi Park.

At 10:30 on 18 August 1996, five other hikers and I encountered a small juvenile owl on the ground in the centre of a trail about 200 m. from Garibaldi Lake (49°58'N 123°09'W) in Garibaldi Provincial Park, B.C. As the owl remained motionless, I was able to approach it closely and examine it in detail. After having it photographed (Figure 1) and making detailed notes, I concluded that the bird was a Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*). As the bird was in the path of hikers, I picked it up to move it off the trail. The owl did not resist initially, but then flew to the ground. It flew poorly, landing only a few feet away. When I attempted to pick it up again, the owl resisted by hopping away from me, and by making clicking noises after I caught it. I placed it a few feet off the trail, where it remained still and watched us. The entire episode lasted about 7 minutes.

Its poorly developed flying abilities indicated that the owl must have fledged nearby recently. Traces of downy feathers sticking out all over its head, as well as on its back and auxiliary feathers (Figure 1) also clearly identified it as a juvenile. Upon first sight, I recognized the owl as being of the genus *Aegolius*. The owl was about 19 cm. in length, matching the size of a juvenile Boreal Owl (David Fraser personal communication 20 August 1996), larger than a juvenile Northern Saw-whet Owl (*A. acadicus*), and both



**Figure 1.** Juvenile Boreal Owl near Garibaldi Lake on 18 August 1996.  
Photo by Wayne Hartwig

larger and bulkier than a Northern Pygmy-Owl (*Clauacidium gnoma*). Its tail was short, and the primary extension basically covered it. The primaries, secondaries and tertials were dark chocolate brown, and covered with circular white or light-coloured spots typical of *Aegolius*. The chest feathers were scraggly and were completely chocolate brown with mottling towards a slightly lighter belly as typical of Boreal Owls, with no trace of the tawny-cinnamon colouration of juvenile saw-whet owls. The back, rump, head, and facial disks were also dark chocolate brown. The owl had large yellow eyes with black irises. The bill was the light bone colour typical of Boreal Owls, not dark as in saw-whet owls. The eyebrows and area around the bill were lighter than the rest of the face but were dark brown, unlike the white on a young saw-whet owl. There was absolutely no sign of ear tufts.

In short, the size of about 19 cm., bone-coloured bill, dirty grey eyebrows and dark whiskers around the bill, overall dark chocolate-brown colour with no reddish or cinnamon tinge, and dark brown chest with no cinnamon or tawny-ochre on belly all identified this juvenile owl as a Boreal, rather than a Northern Saw-whet Owl. Richard J. (Dick) Cannings and Chris Siddle both verified my identification from copies of the colour photograph that I sent them. In addition to the features outlined above, Siddle commented that the only additional species with superficially similar young is the Northern Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*). Hawk owl young differ in having an ashy colour on top of the head and whitish on the lower half of the facial disk.

The owl was in a tall semi-open evergreen forest of Mountain Hemlock (*Tsuga mertensiana*), cedar (*Thuja* sp.) and fir (*Abies* sp.) just below the true subalpine zone. Canopy cover was approximately 60%. Elevation was about 1520 m.

The Boreal Owl is considered to be a rare resident in the northern and southern interior of British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1990). Although probably a widespread breeder (Johnsgard 1988; Campbell *et al.* 1990), only four previous breeding records in B. C. have been documented. Although the probable breeding range mapped by Johnsgard (1988:220) extends to the west coast in northern British Columbia, none of the previously documented records were in west coast mountain ranges. The first documented record was of a juvenile specimen collected at Flood Glacier on 28 July 1919 (Swarth 1922). Campbell *et al.* (1990) summarize details of

two additional records 40 km. north of Wonowon in 1984 and 15 km. east of Okanagan Falls in 1988. A nest with five eggs was found on 18 April 1992 100 m. from the Okanagan Falls site; two large young were ready to fledge on 2 June 1992 (Dick Cannings personal communication 27 August 1997).

Campbell *et al.* (1990) listed no spring or summer records of this species in coastal British Columbia, and only five fall and winter records. There are a few subsequent coastal records, including five in the Fraser Valley (Elliott and Gardner 1997), but the species remains "accidental" there. Thus, our Garibaldi Park encounter represents the western-most documented breeding record for British Columbia, and one of a few west coast area records of Boreal Owls in the province. Similarly, the only Washington state coastal record is considered hypothetical and the only breeding record for that state is in its eastern portion (Johnson and Hudson 1976; Batey *et al.* 1980).

As Boreal Owls nest early in the year and respond to tapes of their calls most consistently then (Cannings 1986; Campbell *et al.* 1990), additional nestings in Garibaldi Provincial Parks and other coastal montane regions may have been overlooked due to the difficult access to most areas of higher elevation during their breeding season. Early year research at higher elevations would help clarify their breeding status in the province.

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#### Boreal Owl Family

This drawing originally appeared in *Montana Outdoors*, March/April 1990 issue. Reproduced here with the kind permission of the artist, Joe Thornbrugh, and of the editor.

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