

PENNSYLVANIA ORNITHOLOGICAL RECORDS COMMITTEE
210 Welcome Ave. Norwood, PA 19074

5 February 2002

Doug McWhirter
10112 West Holt Highway
Diamondale, MI 48821

Dear Doug,

Thank you for submitting documentation on the Northern Hawk-Owl along I-80 in Centre County on 15 January 2000. After careful review, the Committee regrets that it has voted not to accept the record.

Members' opinions were divided, and the balloting went two rounds (which partly explains the delay in announcing our decision). The result was three in favor of acceptance and four not in favor.

The dissenting voters placed the record in our Class IV-A: "a record for which there exists a majority of evidence in support of the observer's identification; the record is probably correct, but not beyond reasonable doubt."

All four dissenters expressed a single major concern: Is accepting a fast drive-by identification advisable for a species with only two accepted Pennsylvania records? Even though your description was quite persuasive, the four decided that a conservative position would be most appropriate.

Sincerely,



For the Committee:
Paul Hess, Chairman

Record No. 446-01-2000

446-01-2099

RARE BIRD REPORT

SPECIES: Northern Hawk Owl *Surnia ulula*

DATE: 15 JAN 00

LOCATION: between mile 144 and 145 on I-80 in Pennsylvania.

TIME of DAY: about 1100 (11am).

LENGTH of OBSERVATION: less than a minute.

DISTANCE: 300 to 15m or less.

VIEWING CONDITIONS: hazy overcast, sun to back.

OPTICS USED: the proverbial "naked eye".

CIRCUMSTANCES of OBSERVATION:

We were heading back to Michigan from a family trip to NYC. Since I was not driving, I was enjoying the scenery and watching for birds. I saw this bird ahead and thought at first it might be an accipiter, but soon realized the profile was wrong. The bird looked more like a big fat shrike. As we got closer, I realized what the bird might be and focused, as much as possible, on the front of the bird as we zoomed by. My attempts to look back at the bird after we passed it by were not very successful. Although the view was quick, viewing conditions were excellent. If circumstances had been different, I would have circled back and tried to see the bird again.

BEHAVIOR:

The bird was perched on the north side of the expressway, at the edge of the cleared edge. It was sitting out in the open on a dead branch and seemed to be peering intently at the slope between it and the expressway. The bird was maybe 5-6m above the ground, level with the expressway at that site. The general area was wooded with variable open spots.

ID POINTS:

As we approached, I was able to see the profile of the bird quite well and, as I said, it resembled a large shrike. It seemed to be the size of a medium-sized Cooper's Hawk, but it was not as slim looking. The tail was proportionally longer than a typical owl, not quite as proportionally long as an accipiter.

The overall coloration was dark brown or gray-brown with white marks. My quick impression was that the sides, back and head were "spotted" with white.

The front view showed a flat owl face with whitish disks. The disks were bordered top and sides with distinct black edges. I saw the binocular eyes forward, but did not see the color, nor did I really see the bill. The upper chest or "chin" was whitish with darker flecks. This area was also bordered by black on each side, but not above or below. The breast and upper sides had a very distinct pattern of dark brown or gray-brown and whitish bars, looking like shallow crescents of more or less equal width. The belly, flanks, undertail coverts and tail were partially obscured by the branch in this front view, but seemed to have the same pattern as the breast.

446-01-2909

The coloration and pattern were very close to the bird represented in the NatGeo guide.

SEPARATION from SIMILAR SPECIES:

The long tail would eliminate any owl likely to be in the area and the size and color pattern eliminates the rest of them. I was surprised to find, when I checked references later, that the breast pattern alone could separate this species from most owls and hawks. As it is, I believe the combined front patterns of face, chest, and breast as described are distinct from all other raptors found in Pennsylvania.

OTHER OBSERVERS: none.

PRIOR EXPERIENCE with THIS and SIMILAR SPECIES:

I have seen 5 prior Northern Hawk Owls - 3 in Michigan and 1 each in Ontario and New Hampshire. To me the species is quite distinct in appearance and almost instantly recognizable. I have probably seen all the other hawks and owls known to occur in Pennsylvania (unless you have a Swallow-tailed Kite record - a jinx bird for me), and am quite familiar with the most common ones. I have been birding for over 40 years and have served on the Michigan Bird Record Committee.

FIELD GUIDES USED: none at the time.

NOTES on the NOTES:

I did not take notes at the time, memorizing the features I was able to see. On 16 JAN 00 I wrote down the ID marks I remembered, then checked my references to see if the breast pattern was as distinctive as I thought. After that I composed the e-mail I sent to various Pennsylvania birders. This account was written on 17 JAN 00 and proofed on 19 JAN 00. I will e-mail a copy to the Haas' and Paul Rodewald and will snail mail Nick Pulcinella.

As a former state bird record committee member, I am not a big fan of drive-by identifications. However, I am well aware of my own limitations in this regard, and I believe I have represented the bird I saw well and accurately.

I was talking about this sighting with some of my friends and we are wondering if this species gets a lighter plumage with age as some of the other owls do. Most of the birds we can recollect have been dark and heavily barred below, but some illustrations and photos seem to show paler birds. It wouldn't surprise us if it's the young birds that make it the furthest south.

Doug McWhirter 10112 West Holt Highway, Dimondale, MI 48821 517-646-8151
Dmcwhir513@aol.com

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Ballot - Round One

Species: Northern Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*)

Date of Sighting: 15 January 2000 to 15 January 2000

Location: INTERSTATE 80 BETWEEN MILE MARKERS 144-145

County: CENTRE

Observer(s): Doug McWhirter

Date of Submission: 2000

Submitted by: Doug McWhirter

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

Specimen: No


Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead				X				
D. Couchman			X					
P. Hess			X					
R. Ickes			X					
B. Reid				X				
P. Rodewald			X					
M. Sharp			X					
TOTALS			5	2				
DECISION								

Comments:

2ND ROUND

Signature (Secretary):



Date:

5/6/01