

## **Convergent Turistas**

By Michael Huebschen

The juncture of Wisconsin highway 57 and County highway Q in Door County might at first glance appear to be a quite ordinary place for hominid tourist traffic to intersect. There are no less than three art/antique businesses (mostly closed in winter except for the holiday season) and a country church clustered around the intersection, with further indications of hominid industry in both directions on both highways.

To one quite rare Canadian tourist, the locale (in the winter of 2012-2013, at least) might well have embodied something extraordinary. It might well have embodied several plant communities similar enough to the broken spruce forests of Northern Canada, in which it conducts its' summer industry, to bring it to sojourn there in winter sabbatical for many weeks.

This solitary, scarce, winter visitor was not a Canadian Spruce logger, but rather a Northern Hawk Owl. One Wisconsin expert (Ryan Brady/ wisbirdn post/18 January 2013) has opined that this bird is probably a juvenile, given its' smooth uniform flight feathers that show little wear. Adults are more likely to show uneven, worn flight feathers. If gender determination be possible based on size and plumage characters, I am not aware of it.

A dense grove of Eastern White Pine, White Cedar, and White Spruce stand out in the NW quadrant, with grassland fortifying its' perimeter. Large White Pines, Red Pines and Spruce are clumped in the N.E., S.E. and S.W. quadrants, with some adjacent plots of grassland. The S.W. quadrant has a large expanse (a bit under 80 acres) of grass-forbs mix.

Is the supply of small mammal potential prey an inducement for staying that long? I strongly suspect so. It is written that they don't dally long in locales where prey are scarce. In seven trips to observe/photograph the Northern Hawk Owl, I personally saw it capture small mammals on five days. On one of those days, (8 January), I observed it catch three small mammals. The captures that I had a good look at, looked an awful lot like Meadow Voles, although I cannot document that in photographs. The one microtine lunch that I was able to document on memory card was up high atop a power pole. It was not whole for very long. Northern Hawk Owls are known to eviscerate the soft organs from their prey first and consume the remainder headfirst if it be not too large. The skeleto-muscular remains of larger prey are often cached for later use. I believe that I witnessed that behavior more than once with Meadow Voles. Red Squirrels and small Snowshoe Hares (summer) are important prey items in their native Canadian open Spruce forests.

Is snow depth a factor in determining the length of their winter retreat? Tough question. It is reported that as snow depths increase, they often shift their diet towards ground roosting birds (grouse and ptarmigan) in their native Canadian habitats. On one occasion, I witnessed a flock of about 12 Mourning Doves buzzing south out of the conifer grove in the NW quadrant with the Northern Hawk Owl in hot pursuit. It cut one individual out of the flock and followed for about 250 yards before giving up the chase. The Hawk Owl is (as its name might suggest) a

pretty swift flier, much suggestive of an Accipiter hawk. It has the long, pointed wings and longer tail which facilitate that rapid, maneuverable flight.

The same locale is apparently ecologically magnetic to some of the Northern Hawk Owl's summertime adversaries from the Canadian Spruce-Moose biome. I observed both White-winged Crossbills and Pine Grosbeaks working on pine and spruce cones in the area. They were also noted crowding and swooping at the Northern Hawk Owl with much clamorous vocalization. I observed the same type of intolerance by Blue Jays, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Common Crows and Waxwings. On one afternoon, a sizeable flock of about 50 waxwings circled the Hawk Owl at close range while it perched in the top of a very large White Pine right at the highway intersection. I was unable to make certain visual identification of the species by looking for rusty under-tail feathers, but the flock call sounded a lot like the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology recording for Bohemian Waxwing. It seemed to have the lower pitch and choppy syllabification which might distinguish the two. Wishful deduction, perhaps.

The winter stay of this Canadian "emigre" spawned a steady pilgrimage of hominid turistas to the locale who might otherwise have chosen the creature comforts of their home areas over the winter season Door Peninsula. (That description would be me except for my interest in photographing winter landscapes in the Door that has developed since my retirement.) The day trip adventurers came from as far away as Chicago to sandwich a day or two of high adventure in what might otherwise be a routinized work-a-day world.

Would a prudent conservationist drive that far to commune visually with such a rare bird? A perfectly prudent conservationist might by choice, tough it out in a bare-bones one room apartment, live on no-frills diet, consult a field guide for photographs of a Northern Hawk Owl, and call the spiritual journey completed. A somewhat less frugal conservationist might stay in the warm roominess and amenities of an ample (or more than roomy) abode, and consult the internet for a large sample of the photos, videos and natural history information available on the Northern Hawk Owl while calling the aesthetic experience sufficient. Might this be the birding adventure of the future? Possibly. My crystal ball regarding the future hath much fog in it. My spirit, however, yearns for a bit more.

This much less than perfectly prudent conservationist made seven one day trips between 27 November and 15 January to make eye, ear and memory card contact with the Northern Hawk Owl at varying distances. Can I completely justify my expenditure of fossil fuels during those excursions? No. Do I feel fortunate to be able to navigate those journeys in a high MPG compact car? Yes. A much more prudent individual might bicycle that trip and tent camp nearby. In seven trips, I did not encounter any such hardy, spartan souls. I suspect that they are a regular occurrence in "the Door" during the warmer seasons. I tip my hat to them as a group.

The Northern Hawk Owl itself seems to appear in Wisconsin on rare occasions as a solitary visitor in winter. There is one record from 1963 (7 April-23 May) of a nesting Northern Hawk Owl in Douglas County where a first nest fledged two young and a second nest with five eggs was lost to predation (Robert C. Domagalski (2006), Appendix VII, Atlas of the Breeding Birds of

Wisconsin, editors Noel J. Cutright, Bettie R. Harriman, and Robert W. Howe). Its regular nesting range in North America stretches from Newfoundland to eastern Alaska and strays into the northern U.S. only rarely. Even in its native Canadian haunts, its nesting territories are widely scattered in remote locations. Hence, its population nesting biology is difficult to study. Nests are most often built in the snag summits of larger broken-off spruce trees, from two to ten meters off the ground.

Given its low nesting densities in remote Canadian locations, its selection of a fairly busy Wisconsin intersection for a winter retreat and relative tolerance for the hubub thereabouts, is puzzling.

By some accounts, its indifference for the enthusiasm of hominid intruders was at times sorely tested. Whatever be the reasons for its tolerance, I am much the richer for having been one of the pilgrims in this most extraordinary convergence of hominid and avian turistas.