
January 1987

First Sighting of a Short-eared Owl in the U S Virgin Islands

Florida Field Naturalist

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/ffn>

Recommended Citation

Florida Field Naturalist (1987) "First Sighting of a Short-eared Owl in the U S Virgin Islands," *Florida Field Naturalist*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/ffn/vol15/iss2/3>

This Note is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Field Naturalist by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

NOTES

First sighting of a Short-eared Owl in the U. S. Virgin Islands.—On 7 May 1986 at about 1030 hours, a Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) was flushed from the ground on the eastern part of St. Thomas, U. S. Virgin Islands and about 20 meters in front of us. The owl was in a pasture opposite Sapphire Beach Resort, approximately 1.0 km NW of Red Hook. The vegetation in the pasture consisted mainly of guinea grass (*Panicum maximum*) and a few scattered trees such as casha (*Acacia macracantha*) and calabash (*Crescentia cujete*). The owl initially circled and landed on a fence post where it watched our movements. The bird appeared wary and flew whenever we tried to approach it, and it seemed to have several favorite perches in the area. It was seen again later in the day about 1500 hours and three photographs were taken with a 35 mm Nikon FA, but only one of sufficient quality to confirm identification.

The bird was full-grown (about 38-50 cm) but apparently a young of the year as downy tufts could be seen on the head. The flight was slightly erratic with both flapping and gliding. The back was nearly uniformly brown with tan streaking and its breast ochraceous buff with dark streaking above the belly. The face seemed to have a dark outline with creamy or sandy color around the eyes and bill. The bill could not be clearly seen nor the eyes. When in flight, dark patches were evident at the wrist joints. The tail appeared barred with dark brown. The bird generally matched the description of *A. f. portoricensis* given by Wetmore and Swales (1931).

As noted by Hoffman et al. (1979), Short-eared Owls are notorious wanderers having established breeding populations on a number of oceanic islands, and they are vagrants on many other islands (Burton 1973). In the West Indies, *A. flammeus* breeds on Hispaniola (Wetmore and Swales 1931), Puerto Rico and one of its eastern most satellite islands, Culebra (Raffaele 1983), and Cuba (Garrido 1984). Bond (1980) reported North American vagrants (*A. f. flammeus*) from Cuba, Grand Turk, and St. Bartholomew. No *A. flammeus* has been previously recorded in the Virgin Islands, but an unidentified owl reported from St. John, U. S. Virgin Islands in 1980 (Norton 1981) possibly was this species. We suggest the bird we saw on St. Thomas is a vagrant *A. f. portoricensis* from Culebra (40 km to the east of St. Thomas) or Puerto Rico proper based on plumage characters, proximity to breeding stations and time of year.

We wish to express our gratitude to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Grant W4-10. Also, we wish to thank Robert L. Norton and Fred W. Sladen for their review of photographs and manuscript and continued support in advancement of avian community studies.

LITERATURE CITED

- BOND, J. 1980. Birds of the West Indies. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Co.
BURTON, J. A. 1973. Owls of the world. New York: Dutton & Co.
GARRIDO, O. H. 1984. *Asio flammeus* nesting in Cuba. Carib. J. Sci. 20: 67-68.
HOFFMAN, W., W. B. ROBERTSON, AND P. C. PATTY. 1979. Short-eared Owl on Bush Key, Dry Tortugas, Florida. Fla. Field Nat. 7: 29-30.
NORTON, R. L. 1981. West Indies region, winter season. Amer. Birds. 35: 338
RAFFAELE, H. A. 1983. A Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Fondo Educativo Interamericano.
WETMORE, A. G., AND B. H. SWALES. 1931. The Birds of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. U. S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 155. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Inst.

Ann B. Swanbeck, Division of Fish and Wildlife, 101 Estate Nazareth, St. Thomas, U. S. Virgin Islands 00802 and Chris F. Seiler, Box 39 Red Hook, St. Thomas, U. S. Virgin Islands 00802.

Florida Field Naturalist 15: 52-53, 1987.

Eastern indigo snake preys on juvenile Florida Scrub Jay.—The demographic characteristics of few avian species are as well known as those of the Florida Scrub Jay (*Aphelocoma c. coerulescens*). Since 1969, this species has been the focus of an intensive ecological and behavioral study at Archbold Biological Station, 13 km south of Lake Placid in Highlands County, Florida (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). Although predation has been established as the major cause of mortality on eggs, nestlings, juveniles and adults (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984), predation on Scrub Jays has been observed directly in only a few instances (e.g. Webber 1980). Thus, the identity of specific predators remains poorly known. Here, I report an incident of predation on a juvenile Scrub Jay by an eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon corais couperi*).

At 1820 h on 30 August 1986, I heard a sudden outburst of vigorous scolding from an area of oak scrub adjacent to Archbold Biological Station. About eight Scrub Jays, four Rufous-sided Towhees (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*), and a single Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila caerulea*) were scolding an object at the base of a dense patch of oaks (*Quercus inopina*) 1.5-2 m in height. On closer inspection at 1825, I found a freshly dead juvenile Scrub Jay in the jaws of an eastern indigo snake.

When first discovered the snake was grasping the jay around its back and lower neck. The breast feathers were matted and bloodied, however, suggesting that the snake initially struck the jay's breast. The head and other parts of the jay's body appeared to be undamaged. Although the jay was unbanded, it was clearly a juvenile in its first prebasic molt (Bancroft and Woolfenden 1982). By 1830 the snake had shifted its jaws to the back of the jay's head and initiated swallowing movements. The jay was completely swallowed by 1901, at which time I captured the snake and transported it to the headquarters of Archbold Biological Station, where it was examined on 3 September by James N. Layne. The snake was an adult female weighing 634 g. Its total length was 142.7 cm and its snout-vent length was 122.3 cm.

The diet of the eastern indigo snake is not well known. Although captives consume a variety of vertebrate prey, including amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals (Carson 1945), the diet of free living indigo snakes appears to consist mainly of reptiles, especially other snakes. Avian food items are reported only infrequently (Keegan 1944, Babis 1949, Moulis 1976, Steiner et al. 1983).

Based on the status of its first prebasic molt relative to that of banded juveniles of known age, the Scrub Jay captured by the snake probably hatched in late April or early May 1986. Thus, the jay was about four months old at the time of its capture. Juvenile jays of this age have fully developed flight and tail feathers and are strong, capable fliers. Because no unbanded juvenile jays were known to be resident in the territories adjacent to the capture site, the victim was probably a non-resident wandering juvenile. Juvenile jays wander from their natal territories frequently during late August, a time that coincides with a period of greatly increased juvenile mortality (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984).

Although Florida Scrub Jays may be stalked by more active predatory snakes such as the eastern coachwhip (*Masticophis f. flagellum*; Webber 1980), it seems unlikely that a strong flying jay could be stalked successfully by a non-cryptically colored, slow moving eastern indigo snake. I suspect that the jay was unable to detect the snake in the dense foliage, leaf litter, shade and sun flecks of the capture site, and simply approached too close while foraging.