Possible Sharp-tailed Snake Observation near Parksville, British Columbia

G. Allen Poynter

1276 Saltspring Place, Parksville, BC V9P 2T5

The Sharp-tailed Snake (Contia tenuis) is a small, rarely seen, and secretive species that has a patchy distribution in British Columbia. It has only been recorded on seven Canadian Gulf Islands and at a few locations on extreme southern Vancouver Island (Matsuda et al. 2006). Field observations of this small snake are important to document as future investigations may reveal an additional disjunct population for the province.

On 23 May 2006, while visiting Rathtrevor Park, three kilometres south of Parksville, British Columbia, I observed what I think was Sharp-tailed Snake. During the four to five seconds I watched the snake it moved over a small loose gravel surface from the road edge into long grasses and brush. This occurred near the turn off into the #1 parking lot. I tried to grab the snake as it moved into the dense grasses but was not successful.

The snake was approximately 450 mm (17.7 in) long and very thick in comparison to a garter snake (Thamnophis spp.) giving it a short and fat appearance. The sharply pointed tail terminated the squat body and was very unlike any garter snake I have seen. The colour was uniformly dark grey with subtle red longitudinal stripes down the sides with no markings along the top of the body. The scales were very obvious and the snake moved quite fast. This sighting occurred within four to five m from marsh water and trees.

The general habitat in the immediate vicinity was forest edge with water and swampy brush between the road and the trees with a dense ground cover of grasses, wild roses (Rosa nutkana), and willows (Salix spp.). At this time there was an abundance of black slugs (Arion ater) and banana slugs (Ariolimax columbianus) out in the open, the principal food of the Sharp-tailed Snake (Darling 1947, Zweifel 1954).

When I returned home I compared my notes with other publications, including Gregory and Campbell (1996). In addition, over the past 50 years I have observed, handled, and photographed hundreds of garter snakes from around the province, and I am convinced (99%) that the animal was not a Common Garter Snake (Thamnophis sirtalis), Northwestern Garter Snake (T. ordinoides), or Western Garter Snake (T. elegans).

Literature Cited


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**About the Author**

Allen, now retired from a lifelong career in marine construction, has seriously been birdwatching for over 50 years, primarily on Vancouver Island and in the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia. He has written over 150 articles for local publications and has given many illustrated natural history lectures to conservation groups.

He has served on the executive of several natural history groups including Nature Canada and the British Columbia Waterfowl Society. Allen presently lives in Parksville, Vancouver Island, where the pace of birding is slower but he still remains active in data collection and wildlife surveys. Presently, he is President of the Oceanside Woodcarving Club and spends many hours carving birds, his favourite subject.

NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL PREYS ON MOURNING DOVES AT CRESTON, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Lorraine Scott
1620 Fox Tree Road, RR2 Creston, BC V0B 1G2

Throughout its range in North America the diet of the Northern Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*) consists mainly of small birds and mammals, and to a lesser extent insects, reptiles and amphibians (Holt and Leroux 1996; Holt and Petersen 2000). Although diminutive in size, the pygmy-owl has the ability to attack and kill larger bird and mammal prey such as California Quail (*Callipepla californica*), Evening Grosbeak (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*), Townsend’s Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*), Bohemian Waxwing (*Bombycilla garrulus*), American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*), Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), and Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) (Holt and Petersen 2000). This note describes observations of an additional large prey item, the Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*), witnessed in the Creston valley, British Columbia.

On the morning of 12 January 2005, I walked up a trail along a mixed coniferous slope where one of my many bird feeders are located. Upon approach, I heard the agitated calls of Black-capped Chickadees (*Poecile atricapillus*) and Red-breasted Nuthatches (*Sitta canadensis*) and wondered what was causing such alarm. Arriving at the feeding station, I spotted a Northern Pygmy-Owl perched on a branch of a ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) above the feeder. The owl was looking to the ground, where the decapitated body of a Mourning Dove was lying. I wanted to capture this event on film, so hurried back to the house to ask my friend to accompany me with her camera. In the short time I was gone the pygmy-owl had flown to the ground and was standing near the dove (Figure 1). After a few photos were taken, the owl was left to dine on its prey. I had no further sightings of the pygmy-owl and the carcass of the dove remained partially eaten, disappearing a few days later, likely taken by a Coyote (*Canis latrans*) whose tracks are often seen in the area.

Two years later, on 13 January 2007, around 1000 hrs, I looked out the kitchen window and caught the movement of a wing flapping on the ground beneath a Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) in the backyard. I went outside to investigate and discovered a Northern Pygmy-Owl attacking a Mourning Dove on the ground. The dove was barely alive and its...