

## 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



**Figure 1.** Northern Pygmy-Owl sitting on the ground near decapitated Mourning Dove. Creston, BC., 13 January 2005 (Sharon Laughlin). BC Photo 3495 .

struggle soon ended. The pygmy-owl decapitated the dove leaving the remainder of the carcass on the sparsely vegetated ground. In the afternoon, I went back and discovered the carcass had been moved to the backside of the fir tree, so I assumed the owl had returned without being detected. I have up to nine Mourning Doves visit my backyard feeders daily. The Douglas-fir tree is one of their favorite roosting trees, but it is not known whether the owl flushed the dove from the tree or attacked while the dove roosted or was feeding on the ground.

I did not see the pygmy-owl the following two days, but on 16 January, at 0830 hrs, the owl was observed with its feathers fluffed, sitting on the carcass of the dove, breast side up (Figure 2). The nighttime temperature had dropped to -14 °C, cold enough to freeze the remaining flesh of the dove. The owl may have been “brooding” the dove to thaw the flesh. During late afternoon of the same day, I examined the unattended carcass and noted that the dorsal flesh had been consumed but the breast muscle remained intact. The dove carcass had no further flesh consumed when checked on 17 and 18 January.



**Figure 2.** Northern Pygmy-Owl “brooding” carcass of Mourning Dove. Creston, BC., 16 January 2007 (Sharon Laughlin). BC Photo 3496.

The Northern Pygmy-Owl was seen again on the morning of 21 January when it fed for a long time on the dove carcass. It returned around 1430 hrs but there was little left for it to feed on, as the dove skeleton was picked clean after nine days (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Remains of Mourning Dove nine days following attack by Northern Pygmy-Owl. Creston, BC. 21 January 2007 (Sharon Laughlin). BC Photo 3498.

Later the same day, on my rounds to replenish the feeders along the woodland trail, I caught a glimpse of a Northern Pygmy-Owl making a cumbersome get-away with a bird double its size clutched in its talons. The owl landed approximately 14 m into the woods where it plucked a few long wing feathers and disemboweled the crop of a Mourning Dove which was full of seeds and corn. Although I did a search of the area, I could not find where the owl had taken its prey. Oddly, about 30 minutes later, a pygmy-owl was perched atop a large fir tree in front of the house which made me wonder if a pair of owls were on the property.

The Northern Pygmy-Owl measures between 16 to 18 cm whereas the Mourning Dove is 31 cm, nearly twice the length of the owl. The weight of the Northern Pygmy-Owl, with sexes combined, can average between 54 to 64 g (Holt and Petersen 2000) while the Mourning Dove weight, with sexes combined, averages 112 g, or twice that of the pygmy-owl (Mirarchi and Baskett 1994). The Mourning Dove constitutes a new prey item taken by the Northern Pygmy-Owl (Denver Holt pers. comm.).

Residents of the Creston valley, as well as visitors, have also observed the predatory behaviour of the Northern Pygmy-Owl at backyard feeders or when out in natural settings. Additional prey items reported include Northern Flicker, Bohemian Waxwing, Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*), House Finch

(*Carpodacus mexicanus*), Pine Siskin (*Carduelis pinus*), American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*), House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), Meadow Vole (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*), and House Mouse (*Mus musculus*). A pygmy-owl was also observed chasing a Clark's Nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*), but did not succeed in capturing it.

In other communities in the West Kootenay additional prey items reported have included: Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*), Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*), Evening Grosbeak, Red Squirrel, and an earthworm (*Lumbricus* spp.). In addition, the pygmy-owl has been observed swooping at a Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*), a Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) and flying into a flock of Bohemian Waxwings, and a mixed flock of House Finches, Song Sparrows (*Melospiza melodia*), and Black-capped Chickadees, with no witnessed success at predation.

#### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank the following people who provided observations of additional prey items: Jean Saceniaks, Ed McMackin, Dale Grady, Cathy Garrison, Linda M. Van Damme, Norm and Rose Simmons (Creston), Sheila Reynolds (Cranbrook), Gordon Brown (Kaslo), Marlene Johnston (Lardeau), Eric Schindler and Gail Spitler (Johnson's Landing), Len Caron (Shoreacres), Michael McMann (Robson), and Stewart Clow (Nelson).

Sharon Laughlin kindly provided photos while Linda M. Van Damme encouraged and assisted in the preparation of this note. Discussions with Denver Holt were helpful.

#### **Literature Cited**

**Holt, D.W., and L.A. Leroux.** 1996. Diets of Northern Pygmy-Owls and Northern Saw-whet Owls in west-central Montana. *Wilson Bulletin*. 108:123-128.

**Holt, D.W., and J. Petersen.** 2000. Northern Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 494. (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA. 23 pp.

**Mirarchi, R.E. and T.S. Baskett.** 1994.

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 117. (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA. 32 pp.

#### **About the Author**

Lorraine has had a lifelong interest in nature, especially birds. Her passion was further ignited when she met the late Joan Burbridge in the 1970s who became her mentor. Lorraine participates in local Christmas bird counts and Project Feeder Watch, leads bird walks, is a regular contributor to the Wildlife Data Centre, and is devoted to enhancing her property for wildlife. She has been active with the Yaqan Nuki Wetlands Friendship Society in the restoration of wetlands located on the Lower Kootenay Indian Band lands in the Creston valley.

---