

AN ENCOUNTER WITH A NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL AND ITS PREY IN COASTAL BRITISH COLUMBIA

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On 8 December 2002, while surveying waterbirds between 1600 and 1700 hrs along the Westview waterfront near Powell River, British Columbia, Heather Harbord, Blake Fougere, and myself spotted a small owl. It was perching in the bare branches of a red alder (*Alnus rubra*) tree between the road and the beach, about 200 m south of the viewpoint on Marine Avenue. We quickly identified it as a Northern Pygmy Owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*) because of its diminutive size.

The owl moved ahead of us as we walked north on the sea walk to a position opposite the viewpoint. It perched in the branches of a tree at eye level about five metres out from the observation point. It seemed to be going to stay put for a while so cameras were set up. The weather was



Figure 1. Northern Pygmy-Owl holding a recently captured Deer Mouse. Powell River, BC. 8 December 2002 (John Treen). BC Photo 3552.

overcast with cloud and intermittent light rain and a light northwest wind.

During this time the owl dove down to the ground (about three metres away) and reappeared with a small mammal in its talons (Figure 1). The prey was very much alive at this point and was struggling to escape. The owl just sat there until the mammal was still, then it began to fly from tree to tree through the brambles back the way it had come. These were short hops as it was struggling to fly with the weight of its prey (Figure 2). By this time it was getting dark so we ceased our observations. Several photographs were taken of the owl and its prey using a Pentax K1000 camera mounted to a Kowa TSN-822 Spotting Scope using 400 ASA film.

Later photographs were sent to Wayne Campbell



Figure 2. Northern Pygmy-Owl moving through dense brambles clutching its prey. Powell River, BC. 8 December 2002 (John Treen). BC Photo 3552.

The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA. 24 pp.

Nagorsen, D.W. 2005. Rodents & Lagomorphs of British Columbia. Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, BC. 410 pp.

About the Author

John was born, raised, and attended public schools in the Comox valley and later graduated from the University of British Columbia with a B. Ed. (Secondary) Teaching degree in the early 1960s. He moved to Powell River in 1964 and taught school for 35 years until he retired in 1999. John spent most of his spare time as a youth in the Boy Scout organization and as an adult with the Sea Cadets. He has always been interested in the outdoors and nature and in 1998, when the Powell River Naturalist group was formed, became a member. The nature club evolved to become the Malaspina Naturalists to better reflect the whole area of the upper Sunshine Coast. John and his wife became co-presidents for two years and still remain active participants in the Birding Section.

who identified the prey as a Deer Mouse (*Peromyscus maniculatus*), a common small mammal in coastal forests and woodlands. The white belly, bicoloured tail, and white dorsal surface of the hind feet are characteristic (see Nagorsen 2005).

Observations of successful hunting of the Northern Pygmy-Owl anywhere in its North to Central American range are rare (Holt and Petersen 2000). The same authors also mention that the diet of the Northern Pygmy-Owl consists mainly of small birds, mammals, insects and infrequently amphibians and reptiles. The Deer Mouse is one of the small mammals commonly reported as a prey item. What is noteworthy is that the mouse weighs on average about 22 g (Nagorsen 2005), or about 35 % of the body mass of the owl.

Literature Cited

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