

NOTES

MOURNING DOVE AS WINTER PREY FOR THE NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL IN THE CRESTON VALLEY, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Northern Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*) is an uncommon resident of the Creston valley, British Columbia (Van Damme 2002), although it is seen more frequently than many other species of owls because of its diurnal habits. It is known to be an opportunistic feeder, taking a variety of prey, including birds, larger than themselves (Holt and Leroux 1996). There are only two documented records of a Northern Pygmy-Owl killing a Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) throughout its range in North America and both of these occurred in the Creston valley (Scott 2007).

In the afternoon of 29 January 2008 I observed a Northern Pygmy-Owl sitting on the edge of my bird feeder (Figure 1). The feeder is located about five metres from my bird watching window in the house. About a half hour later, it was gone and a Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) and a Mourning Dove



Figure 1. Northern Pygmy-Owl on edge of bird feeder in Canyon, BC. 29 January 2008 (Patricia Mitchell).

were in the feeder. A short time later I noticed that the feeder was unoccupied, and went out to put more seed in. As I approached, a Northern Pygmy-Owl's head popped out of the snow about one metre from the feeder. The owl flew up to a fence post nearest the feeder. I looked in the snow where it had been and found a decapitated Mourning Dove with the upper part of its breast opened up. I turned the carcass over to make sure of the identification. As soon as I walked away, the owl flew back to the carcass and turned it over so it was breast side up again. I continued to see the owl and its prey from the window of my home until about 1800 hrs, when it was nearly dark. I checked again with a flashlight at about 2000 hrs, and the owl was gone.

At about 0745 hrs the next morning the carcass was covered in the light snowfall that had occurred overnight, and I didn't see the pygmy-owl. At 0800 hrs, it landed on the feeder, and then flew to a post nearest the feeder, continually looking down. It then flew down to the snow and back to the feeder. About five minutes later it landed on the carcass and began feeding. Throughout the morning it alternated between the post and the carcass, with one visit to the large larch tree in the yard.

New snow covered the carcass on the morning of 31 January but the owl had no trouble finding it. It sat on the carcass most of the day, feeding and resting (Figure 2). It was gone by 1730 hrs. The owl visited the carcass periodically the following day.

At 0800 hrs on 2 February 2008, the owl flew to



Figure 2. Northern Pygmy-Owl on the Mourning Dove carcass in Canyon, BC. 31 January 2008 (Patricia Mitchell). BC Photo 3634.

the carcass from a rock at the nearby root cellar, where it had likely roosted for the night. After feeding, it returned to the root cellar (Figure 3). An hour or so later, it was gone, and did not visit the carcass for the remainder of the day. The following morning, I observed it on top of a dead birch about 100 m away. By this time, all that remained of the carcass were feathers and a few bones. The next morning the owl checked the carcass from the post then flew into the forest nearby.



Figure 3. Northern Pygmy-Owl resting in a crevice at the root cellar 4 m from the Mourning Dove carcass in Canyon, BC. 2 February 2008 (Patricia Mitchell).

During my observation period, early morning temperatures ranged from -5 to -12 °C; daytime temperatures remained below freezing. Light snow occurred periodically during this period. The snow depth in the area of the carcass ranged between 21 and 24 cm, although it was over 50 cm in sheltered areas elsewhere on our property.

Habitat in which our house is situated is typical of the rural Creston valley. Part of our property has mature mixed deciduous and coniferous forest located about 80 m from the house. In addition to trees and shrubs around the house, there is an edge zone of infilling conifers, large shrubs and small deciduous trees between the house and forest. The rest of the property is open field that has not been hayed for about five years. Neighbouring properties are either partially logged forest or open hayfield.

The diet of Northern Pygmy-Owl in North America is one of the least studied aspects of its life history and generally is poorly known when compared to most other owls on the continent (Holt and Petersen 2000). Even though Mourning Dove has not previously been reported as a food item of Northern Pygmy-Owl (Holt and Petersen 2000), capturing a dove opportunistically will yield a greater energy return compared to capturing many smaller prey. For example, each dove provides enough food for a single owl for about five to eight days.

Further documentation of Mourning Dove as a prey species in the winter diet of Northern Pygmy-Owl in the valley is encouraged. These observations will also bring attention to issues that may develop concerning the conservation of this tiny owl in a rapidly-developing valley.

Literature Cited

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