

Boreal Owl in Rockford: First State Record Since 1914

By Roy Morris

On Sunday morning, 9 February 1997, fellow birder, Marian Doyle, called me with the incredible news that a Boreal Owl (*Asio funereus*) was in her Rockford, Illinois backyard. She said the bird had hit a window of her home and was flying into some evergreens in her yard's back corner. She and a friend, Dolores Jensen, were sure it was a Boreal Owl.

Doyle, an experienced birder, calmly described this astounding event — a Boreal Owl as a yard bird in Illinois. I, on the other hand, was dumbfounded. Only four days earlier, four of us local listers had driven 340 miles to Minneapolis to see a Boreal Owl that was wintering at the Springbrook Nature Center. It was a life bird for three of us and a lower 48 bird for the fourth. My preliminary research before taking the Minneapolis trip prepared me well for confirming Doyle's identification.

I reached her house in a record 10 minutes, and met her in the backyard of this older residential area in the heart of Rockford. The owl was perched in a scraggly upright yew about 5 feet above the ground and was clearly visible from the north. We restricted our approach to about 25 feet to avoid alarming the bird. It



Boreal Owl, First State Record in 89 years. Belvidere, IL, Rockford Co. 9 Feb. 1997. Photo by Marjory Rand.

did not appear to be injured and remained on this perch facing us, allowing extended study with binoculars and a spotting scope.

The 10- to 11-inch long stubby owl had a broad, rounded head and no ear tufts. The grayish-brown head had numerous uniformly distributed small white spots on the forehead. Its face was outlined distinctly with a black rim and black eyebrow enclosing prominent white cheeks. The bill was uniformly ivory and the eyes were yellow. Its whitish breast had numerous broad chocolate brown streaks. The back was brown black. The underside of a broad, stubby tail was mottled brown and whitish with no banding.

It was an adult Boreal Owl!

My immediate concern was to get positive documentation. Calls were made to several local birders with experience in photographing birds, and photos were obtained. Doyle was concerned that the owl had been injured or stressed and wanted to minimize disturbance, but our local telephone tree hot line was used to notify other birders. Over 20 people observed the owl on Sunday. It was gone the following morning never to be

found again.

Only five documented records exist for Boreal Owl in Illinois, the most recent in 1914 in Chicago (Bohlen 1989). Surprisingly, the first documented Illinois Boreal Owl was in 1884 when an owl hit a store window in Rockford.

Literature Cited

Bohlen. 1989. The birds of Illinois. Indiana University Press. Bloomington, IN.

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