

MONTANA OWL WORKSHOP

APRIL 23-28, 2009

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Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

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Leaders: Denver Holt and Megan Fyelling

Our 2009 Montana Owl Workshop was once again a fun and successful program. This workshop is not a birding identification tour, but rather a more science-based approach to the study of owls, and birds in general. In essence, we teach ornithology, using owls as the medium. Participants joined researchers in their daily routine trying to locate owls during the nesting season. It's better than reality television.

Using owls, we discussed avian mating systems, avian migration strategies, avian color, avian voice, morphology, physiology, and a host of other questions related to natural selection and the evolution of birds. We further delved into adaptations in owls. How do they hear so well, see so well, fly silently, and camouflage themselves? We discussed the predator/prey relationship between the owls and their small mammalian prey called voles. Unfortunately, vole species in our area were still low in their population cycles. We also discussed the number of owl species in the world, and how modern molecular techniques for describing a species are used.

On this tour, we enjoyed 30 minutes of viewing a Northern Pygmy-Owl as it called in response to our whistles. We were able to “scope it” full frame and watch as it puffed its white throat out during each call. Participants then observed as we captured a Long-eared Owl. We recorded standard biological data on body mass, age, sex, and wing and tail measurements. We discussed the ethics of research and banding, and the value of research. We addressed what researchers do with the results, among other topics.

During our roadside surveys in the open farmlands, participants were able to observe the ease at which we can find Great Horned Owls, as we identified over 10 nests and counted young owls in each of those nests. On the other hand, however, participants also experienced the anguish of trying to find Great Gray and Barred owls as we hiked through thick coniferous forests in search of these large yet elusive species. Spirits lifted however, as we encountered Short-eared Owls involved in all kinds of behavior. The male owls were fighting over territory boundary, courting for females, and providing food for nesting females. We were even able to observe copulation.

We hiked the bottom of cliff faces looking for evidence of breeding Barn Owls and climbed into several historic nest holes only to find that the nests had been abandoned, or there was no attempt at nesting. The low vole numbers were the likely cause. After investigating 50 plus holes in trees for Northern Saw-whet Owls, we were finally rewarded with a female looking out of the cavity entrance. And finally, after driving 150 miles one-way, our Boreal Owl was not there. A week earlier the owl was at the nest. Although we do not know why the owl was gone, the anticipation of checking 20 cavities for a short glimpse of a Boreal Owl made us all forget about the four feet of snow we were falling through. Nonetheless, it was a great tour.

Although not a birding tour, we did manage to record 92 species of birds, 9 species of mammals, and 1 species of reptile. Highlights for birds included Snow Goose, Barrow's Goldeneye, Ruffed Grouse, Common Loon, Peregrine Falcon, Prairie Falcon, Caspian Tern, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Red-naped Sapsucker, Clark's Nutcracker, Pygmy Nuthatch, American Pipit, Pine Grosbeak, Red Crossbill, and Evening Grosbeak. Highlights for mammals included yellow-pine chipmunk, river otter, and elk.

DAILY NOTES

April 24: Checked sites in the Rattlesnake Wilderness area and McClay Flats for Northern Pygmy Owls. Also worked the brushy draws at the west end of the Missoula Valley for Long-eared Owls. Drove north to the Mission Valley and checked into the Ninepipes Lodge.

April 25: Spent day in the Mission Valley. Checked our sites near Ninepipe, Kicking Horse, and Pablo National Wildlife Refuges. Also worked the back-roads and on the border of the National Bison Range. We concentrated on searching for Great Horned, Western Screech, Great Gray, Barred, and Short-eared owls.

April 26: Spent some of day in the Mission Valley. We then worked north to the Polson area, and then around Flathead Lake. Continued around Flathead Lake to Lake Mary Ronan, and then back to, and drove all the way around Flathead Lake, to Polson, and back to Ninepipe again. We tried for Great Gray, Northern Pygmy, Northern Saw-whet, and Western Screech owls.

April 27: Took the long drive to Lost Trail pass and spent much of the day in 4 feet of snow. Returned to Missoula for farewell dinner. Most of this day was directed at finding Boreal and Northern Saw-whet owls.

BIRD LIST

Snow Goose – Guides only	Ruffed Grouse	Wilson's Snipe – by sound
Canada Goose	Eastern Wild Turkey	Ring-billed Gull
Trumpeter Swan	Common Loon	Caspian Tern
Gadwall	Double-crested Cormorant	Rock Pigeon
American Wigeon	Great Blue Heron	Mourning Dove
Mallard	Turkey Vulture	Eurasian Collared Dove
Blue-winged Teal	Osprey	Great Horned Owl
Cinnamon Teal	Bald Eagle	Long-eared Owl
Northern Shoveler	Northern Harrier	Short-eared Owl
Northern Pintail	Sharp-shinned Hawk	Northern Pygmy-Owl
Green-winged Teal	Swainson's Hawk	Northern Saw-whet Owl
Canvasback	Red-tailed Hawk	Red-naped Sapsucker
Redhead	American Kestrel	Hairy Woodpecker
Ring-necked Duck	Peregrine Falcon	Northern Flicker
Lesser Scaup	Prairie Falcon	Pileated Woodpecker
Bufflehead	American Coot	Steller's Jay
Barrow's Goldeneye	Killdeer	Clark's Nutcracker
Common Merganser	Black-necked Stilt	Black-billed Magpie
Ring-necked Pheasant	American Avocet	American Crow

Common Raven
Belted Kingfisher
Tree Swallow
Violet-green Swallow
Barn Swallow
Black-capped Chickadee
Mountain Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Pygmy Nuthatch
Winter Wren – by sound
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Mountain Bluebird
Townsend's Solitaire
American Robin
Varied Thrush – by sound

European Starling
American Pipit
Orange-crowned Warbler
Song Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Red-winged Blackbird
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Western Meadowlark
Brewer's Blackbird
House Finch
Red Crossbill
Pine Siskin
Evening Grosbeak
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

MAMMAL LIST

Yellow-pine Chipmunk
Columbian Ground Squirrel
Red Squirrel
Fox Squirrel
Northern Flying Squirrel
River Otter
Muskrat
White-tailed Deer
American Bison
Elk

REPTILE LIST

Western Painted Turtle