Surnia funerea.
SURNIA FUNEREA
Hawk Owl.

Strix funerea, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 25.

Tus diurnal Owl, so commonly spread over many parts of Northern Europe, Siberia, and America, having
been twice captured in England, ornithologists generally agree in the propriety of giving it a place in our
aflflana: its visits, however, must be regarded as purely accidental; and destitute as these islands are
of the peculiarly wild and sterile districts so frequent in the countries it inhabits, it is not likely that
it will ever become a resident here. Its first occurrence in Britain was recorded by the late Mr.
Thompson, of Belfast, in the Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London for 1833, in the fol-
lowing words:—"Surnia funerea. An Owl of this species, preserved in the collection of Dr. Birkitt, of
Waterford, was taken on board a collier, a few miles off the coast of Cornwall, in March 1830, being at the
time in so exhausted a state as to allow itself to be captured by the hand. On the arrival of the vessel at
Waterford, whither she was bound, the bird was given to a friend of Dr. Birkitt, with whom it lived a few
weeks, and then came into his possession."

The second instance of its appearance was recorded in the 'Zoologist' for 1851, p. 3029, by Mr. E. T.
Higgins, who says: "The subject of this communication was shot on the 25th or 26th of August, 1847,
about two o'clock in the afternoon (the sun shining brightly at the time), whilst hawking for prey on Back-
well Hill, near the Yatton (Clevedon) Station, on the Bristol and Exeter Railway, and on the day following,
whilst still in the flesh, came under my observation; for the genuineness of the specimen I can therefore
vouch. The delay in the record of its capture has arisen from my inability to obtain the bird for description
sooner. Having at length had it placed in my hands, I hasten to bring it before your readers." After giving
a minute description, and a very good woodcut of the specimen, he continues: "This is in all probability a
young bird; I say 'in all probability,' because the rare birds, which have at different times been obtained
in England, have, with scarcely an exception, been examples of the first or second year. May we not, from
this remarkable but well-known fact, reasonably conclude that the occurrence of these accidental visitors
is to be attributed to their instincts not being sufficiently developed to enable them to retrace their way
when carried to a distance from their natural habitat by a strong current of wind?"

For an account of the habits and economy of this elegant and singular Owl, which of course I have had
no opportunities of observing myself, I must draw largely upon other ornithological writers, and shall com-
mence with Mr. Wolley's account in the 'Zoologist,' and Mr. Wheelwright's in his 'Spring and Summer
in Lapland,' both because they treat of the bird as seen nearest home, and because, in my opinion, their
remarks are particularly truthful and interesting.

"The Hawk Owl," says Mr. Wolley, "is not uncommon in Lapland. It flies much in the day-time, and, with
its long tail, short wings, and quick flight, has a very hawk-like appearance in the air when the large and square
form of its head is not seen. Its cry, when uttered near its nest, is also similar to a hawk's; and it often sits
on the bare top of an old dead fir to watch intruders, apparently without any idea that it can be in danger.
It carries itself much after the fashion of the more regular Owls; but, while the feathers at the back give
a great breadth to its full face, there is quite a 'table' at the top of its head. It exists its bright yellow eyes
downwards with the true air of half-puzzled wisdom, or turns its head round for a leisurely gaze in another
direction; to glance backwards is out of the question, and to look at any one with a single eye much beneath
its dignity. I have seen it from my window fly down from its stand, and take the mouse it caught back to
the tree before it began to eat it; but it shifted its place several times before it found a convenient spot
for finishing the meal. When disabled, it at once 'squares' itself for defence, putting on its most
formidable countenance, guarding its back and presenting its front to the enemy; silently and calmly it
maintains its ground, or springs from a short distance on its foe. So, bravely, it dies, without a thought of glory, or without a chance of fame; for of its kind there are no cowards."

Mr. Wheelwright describes it as by far the commonest Owl in the district of Quinicoq; and although lemmings form its principal food when they are ‘in season,’ he believes it does not migrate to any extent, but remains stationary throughout the year. In winter it is occasionally killed as far south as Wermeland; but these have merely strayed from their native haunts—the lower fir-forests at the foot and by the sides of the fells. He proceeds to say that ‘it is by no means shy, and in the breeding-season is one of the boldest of birds. Seated on the top of a dead pine, close to the nest where his mate is sitting, the old male keeps a constant watch, and, as soon as any one approaches, raises his tail and head, after the manner of the cuckoo, and, uttering a shrill cry, not unlike that of the Kestrel, down he comes full on the head of the intruder. Dashing by with the speed of lightning, he returns to the charge again and again, till he has either driven him away or paid the penalty of his rashness with his life. The lad who attended me was really frightened at this bird, and always hated to go up to a nest; and well he might; for on one occasion, when taking the eggs out of a dead pine, without a branch to help him, holding on, as the sailors say, ‘by his eyelids,’ forty feet from the ground, the old bird made a swoop down on his head, struck off his cap (through the top of which a large slit was cut), and in a moment returned to the charge, tearing off a very fair-sized clawful of his hair. I was standing at the bottom of the tree with my gun; and had I not knocked the bird over, the lad might have been easily beaten off his hazardous perch. There is no trouble in shooting the Hawk Owl if you have a dog with you; for whatever time of the year it may be, as soon as the bird spies the dog, it descends to give battle.

"In flight, manners, and appearance this bird is closely allied to the hawks. It is strictly diurnal in its habits, and to the stealthy quiet flight of the Owl adds the spirit and courage of the Falcon. Hardly a forest bird is safe from its attacks. I have seen it strike down a Siberian Jay, its nearest neighbour, on the wing; and more than once have disturbed it while feeding on an old Willow Grouse, a bird half as large again as itself. Its principal food appears to be birds, lemmings, and wood mice; but I have often found insects in the stomach. There is little difference in the plumage of the two sexes; but the female is rather the largest, and in the breeding-season has the breast and belly strongly tinged with reddish brown. I know the male takes his turn in sitting upon the eggs, for I have shot both sexes as they flew out of the hole in which they were deposited.

"The Hawk Owl moults early; the old birds may be seen without tails before the young are able to fly, and the annual moult is complete by the time the young are fully feathered. The bird is then in its best plumage, and its clean, bare, shiny dress is very different from the dingy colouring of spring."

The number of eggs laid by this Owl seems to vary from six to seven or eight. Mr. Newton, in his 'Oothea Wolleyana,' mentions one with eight, two with seven, and one with six. Their usual size is 1 1/2 inch by 1.

The late Sir John Richardson states, in the 'Fauna Boreali-Americana,' that this ‘Owl, which inhabits the Arctic Circle in both continents, remains all the winter in high northern latitudes, and is rarely seen so far south as Pennsylvania, and then only in severe winters. It is a common species throughout the fur-countries from Hudson's Bay to the Pacific, and is more frequently killed than any other by the hunters, which may be attributed to its boldness and its habit of flying about by day. In the summer season it feeds principally on mice and insects; but in the snow-clad regions which it frequents in winter neither of these are to be procured, and it then preys mostly on Ptarmigan. It is a constant attendant upon the flocks of these birds in their spring migrations to the northward. When the hunters are shooting Grouse, this bird is occasionally attracted by the report of the gun, and is often bold enough, on a bird being killed, to pounce down upon it, though it may be unable from its size to carry it off. It is also known to hover round the fires made by the natives at night."

Mr. H. E. Dresser informs me that the Hawk Owl is not uncommon in New Brunswick, and often to be seen on "rampikes" (large dead trees so called) standing alone on the blueberry burrens. At certain seasons it occurs in large numbers, and is supposed (by the country people) to bring ill luck. My friend Mr. George Boardman, of St. Stephen, N. B., has found the eggs of this Owl in that neighbourhood; but I myself never succeeded in finding them, though I have searched the birds all the year round on the Musquash River, where I resided. They appear to feed almost entirely on a small species of mouse that is numerous on the burrens; for, though I have dissected many, I never found the stomach to contain anything but the remains of these animals. They seek their prey during the daytime, and seem to enjoy sitting on the very top of an old scathed tree in the full glare of the sun.

The front bird in the Plate is of the natural size; the other is somewhat reduced.

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