

Utah County Birders Newsletter
March 2017

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MARCH MEETING:

Thursday, March 9th, 2017

Utah Specialty Owls-When and Where to See Them. Utah County Birders will be sharing information about various species. Note that the field trip (an owling adventure) will be complementing this meeting.

Meet at 7:00 pm at the Monte L. Bean Museum. 645 East 1430 North, Provo, UT
<http://mlbean.byu.edu/>

FIELD TRIPS:

Saturday, March 11th, 2017: Starting at 5:30pm

Owls

Meet at the NE corner of the Payson Walmart parking lot.

Target birds are: Barn Owl, Short-eared Owl, Great Horned Owl, Long-eared Owl, Western Screech-Owl, Northern Pygmy-Owl, and Northern Saw-whet Owl (in that order). Sorry, no Snowy, Boreal, or Great Gray this time - unless something changes

We are actively recruiting people to lead local half-day field trips, any time, any place. If you would like to lead a field trip or if you have any ideas for this year's field trips, please contact Keeli at -
keeli.marvel@gmail.com

Utah County Birders Captain's Log: March 2017

by Keeli Marvel

The last time I checked in I was adding on life birds in Florida. Good news! I ended up adding Eastern Meadowlark, Swamp Sparrow, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Brown-headed Nuthatch (my new favorite nuthatch) to my life list. I also added a probable Red-cockaded Woodpecker, although I never got a visual confirmation, just an audio. I'm not officially counting it, but we saw plenty of nest colony trees on our field trip, so it's not a far stretch.

In February I went on to continue my lifering streak as I promptly added Harris' Sparrow and Great Gray Owl to both my Utah list and my life list the week I returned from Florida. I was looking over my records, and adding two life birds in Utah hasn't happened for me in a while. In fact, I added only one in 2016 - the Common Black Hawk - and none in 2015. Needless to say, it's been a good month!

I hope all of you who wanted to were able to make it up to Mountain Green to see the Great Gray Owl. I know there was some concern and some controversy within the birding community regarding the sharing of the initial sightings, the location, and then the massive influx of people who showed up to see it. I truly believe the vast majority of birders (including those in our group) were sensitive to the impact on the owl we were having as a community. I know there was a great deal of discussion about birding ethics, and there were a couple of instances where a few people were clearly too close to the bird (which I hope was purely out of ignorance and not someone from the birding community). I believe honestly that any attempt to withhold the location or police the people going to see the owl was done out of concern for the bird's welfare first and foremost, and there were no hard feelings intended.

As a biologist, I think sometimes I forget that a lot of birders are not biologists and don't necessarily have the same level of understanding of ecological and physiological processes and pressures birds are experiencing, but care for the birds no less and want to do the right thing by them. This bird was a once-in-a-lifetime sighting and a large number of people were lucky enough to be able to experience seeing it without seeming to have a noticeable impacts on its' existence. This seems like a win for everyone and a great educational opportunity. Without getting too preachy, I just wanted to mention this in hopes that in the future we all continue to keep in mind the impacts we are having on birds and the environment in the pursuit of what we love and that we continue to be a sharing, educating, conservation-minded and passionate community. Whew. Alright, I'm stepping off my soap box now. 😊 As a community, you guys are awesome. I've been told a few times how friendly and welcoming our group is.

Stay awesome, and keep on birding!

Bird of the Month

Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*)
by Dennis Shirley

Utah's 2017 Great Gray Owl Bonanza
It's been about ten days (Feb. 19) since the last report of the Great Gray Owl in Mountain Green. So it may have moved on, starting to go back north to its normal breeding range. But it's been an exciting month for Utah birders with first the Heber North Fields Great Gray Owl report coming out near the end of January. This one didn't pan out like we all hoped – only a handful of people actually go to see it. But a big crowd showed up for a day or two and got us all primed for the Morgan County bird.

The Mountain Green bird was first confirmed on the morning of Feb. 2, 2017. A quickly removed facebook report had been posted on the previous day, but several birders noticed it and made plans to be there the next day. It was easily found by 6-8 birders that morning and soon the word was out and birders from all over the state converged in the area over the next nearly three weeks. The neighborhood residents were generally happy to share "their" owl with all involved. It was a carnival-like atmosphere when the larger crowds were there.



photo by Jeff Cooper

The owl itself was amazing! It seemed very confident and as long as people didn't get overly aggressive and get too close the owl just went ahead and did his activities without even noticing anyone was around. He was often times hunting for prey and actually seen catching and swallowing field mice. There were a bunch of great photos taken of him.

The Great Gray Owl is an accidental winter visitor to Utah. Up to this year there had only been nine previous records, and several of these are marginal at best. The last was during the winter of 1989 when one was seen in Cache and Rich counties. The only Utah owl with fewer records is the Elf Owl with seven. It's interesting the only years when GGO has occurred in Utah are years of bad winter and heavy snowfall across the western states. During the record snowfall of 1948-49, Steve Carr, a long time Salt Lake County birder who many of us knew, recorded the first GGO in the state at his home. The Deseret News also noted a number of these large gray owls wintering along the Wasatch Front that winter.

The Great Gray Owl is the largest North American owl. Its closest relatives are the Spotted and Barred Owl (genus - Strix). It is an owl of the deep Boreal Forest from Alaska across Canada and down the northern Rockies. In spite of its large size, they are almost entirely small rodent eaters, mostly microtine field mice. Studies have shown less than 1% of their diet is small birds.

For some of us it's been a long time coming to finally see a Great Gray Owl in Utah, close to 40 years of birding for me. Owls hold a special place to most birders. Not many birds stare back at you like an owl does with its large piercing eyes and they seem to have their own aura. Now let's go find a Boreal and Snowy.

If you would like to write an article for the Bird of the Month, please contact Mabelle - mabelle13johnson@yahoo.com

Field Trip Report

Unfortunately the two field trip options in February fell through. Please join us for an exciting owling adventure in March!

Backyard Bird of the Month

Dennis Shirley

Four **Canada Geese** - circling high over my yard during a snowstorm on Feb. 22, 2017. Unusual for our oak brush bench area.

Report your favorite backyard bird each month to Josh Kreitzer at joshkreitzer@gmail.com
