

BIRDS

THE BARN OWL COMES TO ALBERTA ... FINALLY

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The Barn Owl is one of the most widely distributed of all land birds. It is found throughout most of Britain and Europe, across most of Asia, Africa, and throughout much of North America. It is also found in grassland areas of South America, as well as oceanic islands such as the Galapagos and Hawaii.^{1, 7} This species resides in North America from southwestern British Columbia through Washington, Oregon, northern Utah, southern Wyoming, southern Michigan, to southern Ontario. From Massachu-

Figure 1. North American distribution of the Barn Owl. (Lockshaw 2000)



setts, the range runs south to Florida and through the entire southern United States into South America.⁷ The Barn Owl is rare in the northern tier of the United States, north of latitude 41°, but it increases in abundance southward (Figure 1).²

The Barn Owl is limited in its northern distribution. In Montana, the Barn Owl is a stray or accidental species, with fewer than 15 records in the state (D. Holt, pers. comm.). It has been suggested that the Barn Owl may wander north to southern Alberta, southern Saskatchewan, and southern Manitoba.⁷ In British Columbia, breeding records are restricted to southern Vancouver Island from Sooke to Ladysmith, and in the Fraser Lowlands from Vancouver and Reifel Island east through the Fraser River Valley to Hope.⁸ Non-breeding records spread farther through the southern Gulf Islands and along the coast of southeastern Vancouver Island (Sooke to Campbell River). There are extralimital records from Brackendale, the Okanagan Valley, West Kootenay at Trail, Creston, Valemount, and Fort St. John.⁵

In Saskatchewan, one specimen was obtained from Balcarres in 1910 and another from Aylesbury in 1924.¹² Nine additional records appear in the Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds which describes

the Barn Owl as a spring/fall transient and a summer visitant. In August 1995, a Barn Owl was observed in an abandoned barn approximately 16 km northeast of Senlac, Saskatchewan (across the border from Provost, Alberta) (M. Heckbert, pers. comm.).

There are no confirmed records for Barn Owls in Alberta and this bird is not even on the hypothetical list for species in Alberta.⁵ A Barn Owl had been reported at Lethbridge in 1979, however the photo included with the account was of an Eastern Screech-Owl.⁵ Only one hypothetical Alberta record has been reported, from the Cypress Hills in July 1967.¹¹

In the winter of 1999/2000, three confirmed Barn Owl records were submitted to Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish and Wildlife, in Edmonton. The first record to come to our attention was a road-killed specimen recovered in January 2000 on Highway 2, west of Wetaskiwin (52° 58' N, 113° 22' W), which was turned in by wildlife rehabilitator Greta

Millenaar. We examined this owl and found it to be a bird in its first year of life, based on plumage.¹⁰

Jim Whitehouse videotaped and photographed a live Barn Owl (Figure 2) of unknown age and sex roosting in a pole barn located approximately 9 km west of Bashaw (52° 35' N, 112° 58' W). The bird was first detected in mid-December 1999, remained in the area for several weeks, and left with the onset of cold weather in early January 2000. Jim collected several pellets below the owl's perch. Subsequent analysis showed that the bird had consumed at least 11 Meadow Voles (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) and one unidentified shrew during its stay.

The third Barn Owl was turned in dead to Inglewood Bird Sanctuary in Calgary by Annette Born. She found the bird on January 17, 2000 near a shed on her farm near Langdon Slough, east of Calgary (50E 58' N, 113E 40' W). Like the bird collected near Wetaskiwin, this specimen was sent to the Provincial Museum of Alberta in Edmonton.



Figure 2. Barn Owl near Bashaw.

Jim Whitehouse

Table 1: Location, date, and observation information on Barn Owls in Alberta.

Date of Record	Location	Observation
January, 2000	Wetaskiwin	*Road killed bird turned in to Fish and Wildlife.
January 4, 2000	Bashaw	Live bird last seen in barn; stills and video footage taken.
January 17, 2000	Langdon	*Dead bird turned in to Inglewood Bird Sanctuary.

* Provincial Museum of Alberta (Edmonton) accession numbers: 200.4.1 and 200.5.1

Long distance movement patterns of Barn Owls have been studied extensively in Europe.⁴ In North America, movements of birds tend to be southerly, and between 300 to 900 km in length.^{5,9,14,15} The early months of the winter of 1999/2000 were some of the warmest on record in Alberta. Quite possibly, these warm conditions encouraged dispersing juvenile barn owls to venture much farther north than normal.

Information requested

We are always looking for new information on locations of owls in the province. If you have records of owl sightings, particularly rare species or unusual locations, please send information on species, date, and location, to lisa.takats@gov.ab.ca or mail to authors' address. All dead birds turned in to Alberta Fish and Wildlife offices should have information included on location and date of collection, so that we may enter the information into the database to track distributions of species.

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