

A BROWN HAWK-OWL (*NINOX SCUTULATA*) FROM KISKA ISLAND, ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, ALASKA

ALEXANDER L. BOND and IAN L. JONES, Department of Biology, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's A1B 3X9, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada; abond@mun.ca

On 1 August 2008 Bond found the carcass of an unidentified owl at Sirius Point, Kiska Island, in the Rat Island group of the Aleutian Islands, Alaska (52° 08' N 177° 36' E, Figure 1), in Glen Larry canyon between two lava flows. Within that canyon, dead birds (mostly auklets, *Aethia* spp.) had been found frequently in a low area, possibly because of CO or CO₂ gas seeping from the more recent lava flow. The owl carcass was photographed in camp (Figures 2 and 3), but it was in poor condition and was not preserved. Some time later, upon returning from the field, Jones examined the photographs and identified the carcass as that of a Brown Hawk-Owl (*Ninox scutulata*).

The owl was generally chocolate brown above, with white scapular patches, underparts white but heavily streaked with brown slightly lighter than that of the back, the tail with distinct bars of light and dark brown, and less distinct barring on the primaries and secondaries. The underside of the wing was mostly light, with the outer primaries showing fewer and smaller light patches than the secondaries. The legs were feathered; the toes were almost bare but with a hairy appearance and dark rose in color. The bill was blackish with a paler culmen. Overall, the owl lacked a distinct facial disk and ear tufts and measured approximately 30 cm in length. This distinctive specimen fit the description of only one species, *Ninox scutulata* (Ali and Ripley 1983, Meyer de Schauensee 1984, del Hoyo et al. 1999, König et al. 1999).

This is the second record of the Brown Hawk-Owl for Alaska and North America, the first being in September 2007 on St. Paul Island, in the Pribilof Islands (Yerger and Mohlmann 2007). Among Old World birds that have reached Alaska, other Asiatic owls include the Boreal Owl of the Russian Far East (*Aegolius funereus magnus*) recorded in 1911 at St. Paul (Evermann 1913), the Oriental Scops-Owl (*Otus sunia japonicus*), recorded in the 1970s at Buldir and Amchitka islands in the Aleutian chain (Gibson and Byrd 2007), and (probably) the Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*, subspecies unknown), photographed in 2006 aboard a ship in the northern Bering Sea (Gibson et al. 2008). Finally, the Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus flammeus*) that occur annually in the western Aleutians are thought to be migrants from Asia (Gibson and Byrd 2007).

It is impossible to determine when the Brown Hawk-Owl arrived at Kiska, but from its state of decomposition it had probably been dead for at least several weeks. If the owl arrived during summer 2008, winds predominantly from the south-southeast would not have been particularly helpful in pushing it in the direction of Kiska. A ship-assisted arrival at Kiska cannot be ruled out as the island is near the western Aleutian crossing of the northern great circle route through the North Pacific (Figure 1). In 2007, winds at St. Paul were predominantly from the west or southwest, which would have aided that owl in flight.

The Brown Hawk-Owl has the broadest geographic distribution of any species of the tribe Ninoxini and is a long-distance migrant, ranging from Siberia and China to Indonesia and the Philippines (del Hoyo et al. 1999). Subspecies *japonica* breeds throughout Japan and in Korea and winters south to the Malay Peninsula, Philippines, Greater Sunda Islands, and Sulawesi (Ornithological Society of Japan 2000). On the basis of that range, it is the subspecies most likely to occur in North America.

Various authorities treat the taxonomy of this species or species complex in a variety of ways. Eleven subspecies have been recognized, but there is consensus that

A BROWN HAWK-OWL FROM KISKA ISLAND, ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, ALASKA

the taxonomy merits revision (del Hoyo et al. 1999, King 2002). The subspecies *N. s. japonica* and *N. s. totogo* have been segregated as *Ninox japonica* or the Northern Boobook (King 2002), the remaining eight to 10 other subspecies constituting *N. scutulata*, the Brown Hawk-Owl (Clements 2007). Other authors (e.g., Gill et al. 2008) maintain one species that includes all of these subspecies. The definition of these two groups is based on vocalizations and differences in wing/tail ratios, but when the birds are not vocalizing, identification in the field is difficult (Ali and Ripley 1983, King 2002). Identification to subspecies from photographs is not necessarily possible (B. King pers. comm.).

On the basis of range, subspecies *japonica*, which breeds in Japan and Siberia and is the most common owl in Japan (Yamashina 1982, Ornithological Society of Japan 2000), is the most likely to occur in North America; the other subspecies breed in India and southeast Asia (Ali and Ripley 1983, Clements 2007).

We thank Ben King for confirming our identification and for valuable discussion on the identification of subspecies. The captain and crew of the M/V *Tiàglax*, research-support vessel of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, provided transportation to Kiska Island and other logistical support. Steven C. Heinl, G. Vernon Byrd, and Daniel D. Gibson provided valuable comments on previous drafts of the manuscript. Additional photographs can be found at <http://www.mun.ca/serg/brownhawkowl.html>.

LITERATURE CITED

- Ali, S., and Ripley, S. D. 1983. Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan, compact edition. Oxford University Press, Oxford, England.
- Clements, J. F. 2007. The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World, 6th edition. Comstock, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A., and Sargatal, J. 1999. Handbook of the Birds of the World, vol. 5: Barn Owls to Hummingbirds. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.
- Evermann, B. W. 1913. Eighteen species of birds new to the Pribilof Islands, including four new to North America. *Auk* 30:15–18.
- Gibson, D. D., and Byrd, G. V. 2007. Birds of the Aleutian Islands, Alaska. Nuttall Ornithol. Club and Am. Ornithol. Union Series in Ornithology 1.
- Gibson, D. D., Heinl, S. C., and Tobish, T. G., Jr. 2008. Report of the Alaska Checklist Committee, 2003–2007. *W. Birds* 39:189–201.
- Gill, F. B., Wright, M., and Donsker, D. 2008. IOC world bird names (version 1.6), www.worldbirdnames.org.
- King, B. 2002. Species limits in the Brown Boobook *Ninox scutulata* complex. *Bull. Br. Ornithol. Club* 122:250–257.
- König, C., Weick, F., and Becking, J.-H. 1999. Owls: A Guide to the Owls of the World. Pica Press, Sussex, England.
- Meyer de Schauensee, R. 1984. The Birds of China. Smithsonian Inst. Press, Washington, DC.
- Ornithological Society of Japan. 2000. Check-List of Japanese Birds, 6th revised edition. Ornithol. Soc. Japan, Tokyo.
- Yamashina, Y. 1982. Birds in Japan. Shubin Int. Co., Tokyo.
- Yerger, J. C., and Mohlmann, J. D. 2007. First North American record of Brown Hawk Owl (*Ninox scutulata*) on Saint Paul Island, Alaska. *N Am Birds* 62:2–6.

Accepted 18 March 2010

A BROWN HAWK-OWL FROM KISKA ISLAND, ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, ALASKA

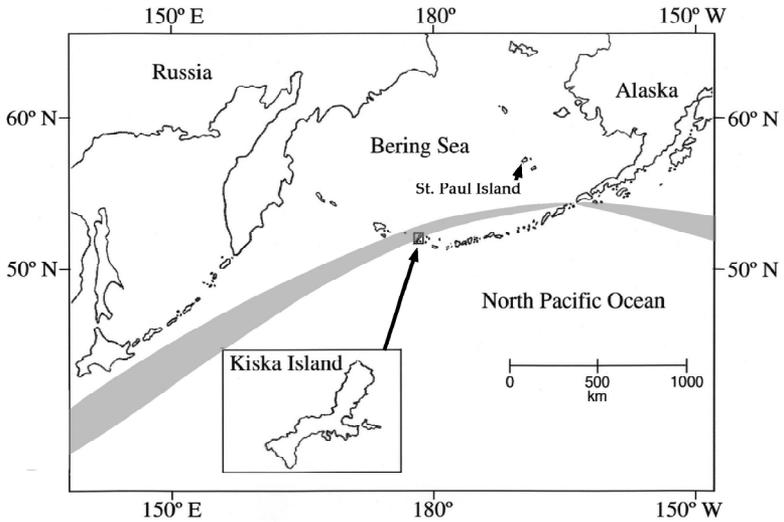


Figure 1. Locations of Kiska and St. Paul islands and the northern great circle shipping route (gray shading) between major ports in Asia and North America.



Figure 3. Ventral view of the Brown Hawk Owl (*Ninox scutulata*) from Kiska Island. The rosy feet, and lack of facial disk are evident.

A BROWN HAWK-OWL FROM KISKA ISLAND, ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, ALASKA



Figure 2. Ventral view of the Brown Hawk Owl (*Ninox scutulata*) from Kiska Island. Note the streaked breast and barring on the underside of the tail.