

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

Elusive Quarry

For a wildlife biologist, things don't always go *exactly* according to plan.

by Barbara Allen Loucks

The mid-afternoon sun shone brightly over the snow-covered fields and golden brown clumps of grass. My heavy felt-lined boots crunched through the snow as I made my way to the small tan camouflaged blind. Glenn Hewitt, my colleague and more experienced trapping partner, busily set up the traps: a few small wire cages containing a couple of mice, covered with monofilament loops to snare an owl's leg; a small piece of noosed wire that fit over the top of a perch pole placed a short distance from the blind; and the largest trap, a circular bownet several feet wide, folded in half and baited in the center.

As biologists, our goal was to put a radio backpack on an endangered short-eared owl to learn more about its habitat needs. Much of the undeveloped land in this upstate New York town is for sale, and we need basic information on these birds to know how best to protect them.

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Once the traps were carefully arranged, we retreated into the blind to sit quietly and wait for the first birds to arrive. It didn't take long before some slender, graceful harriers appeared. Swiftly gliding and turning, sometimes diving at prey, they occasionally landed on a fencepost at the far side of the field or in a tree. Sometimes they interacted with another harrier and we could hear their odd cries. At times they drifted nearby; close enough to see their somewhat owl-shaped faces.

Then, as the sun began to sink further in the sky and the air temperature began to drop—making me appreciate my many layers of clothing and the small propane heater in the blind—short-eared owls began to emerge from their roosts. Their flight was different from that of the harriers: almost moth-like, they appeared to float above the fields, rising and descending, somehow erratically and smoothly at the same time. Unlike many owls, short-eareds often hunt their prey in daylight, especially just before dusk. I felt lucky to be spying on them, their buff and cream colors so perfectly complementing the white and gold fields.

As Glenn and I watched, we grew anxious. Daylight was expiring, and so was our window of opportunity. A few owls



Gordon Ellmers

swooped low over the bownet. One even landed on a large downed tree next to it, but none landed on the traps. Then, suddenly, an owl appeared almost overhead. It drifted down and around, back and forth over the bownet in front of the

blind. I suddenly realized that I was holding my breath. Glenn firmly gripped the end of the long trigger line to the bownet, which was just 35 yards away. The owl abruptly dropped and landed. I could barely see it in the area of the bownet; no, in the middle of the bownet! Glenn knew this was our chance and quickly yanked on the line. Nothing. He pulled again, and still the trap did not spring. Unsettled, the owl opened its wings and lifted off. We left the blind and ran to the bownet. To our dismay, we saw that the netting had caught on something and the trap had not sprung. Instead of an owl in hand, we had an empty trap.

At first, we were disappointed. That season we had caught only one owl. They were proving to be more elusive than anticipated.

As we took down the traps in the dark and packed up the truck, however, we agreed that while our mission may not have been successful, the day certainly was. How lucky we were to work in the field and get a glimpse into the twilight world of these beautiful birds.

And as for capturing our quarry, there's always tomorrow.

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