



# I Have Seen the GREAT GRAY OWL

by Michael A. Zunno

**O**N this particularly cold morning in January, my brother and I were driving through Lloyd Harbor on the North Shore of Long Island. We wished to view the sunrise and do some early morning bird watching. "Look, there's an owl in that tree!" I shouted. We skidded to a stop as my brother hit the brakes.

Leaving the warmth of the car, we stealthily approached to get a closer look. I focused my binoculars onto the large bird. But in the dim light of dawn I was unable to identify it at first. Thinking that the only large owl native to the area is the great horned, I assumed this one to be just that. The bird appeared

not to hear us or see us. From its perch, it continued to gaze intently down at the shoreline. I raised my binoculars again and focused in. I could not believe my eyes. "It can't be, it's impossible!" I thought. But it was a great gray, North America's largest owl.

At that moment, the owl flew with huge billowing wings to an adjacent tree, and we followed. It allowed us to approach within 20 feet. The owl appeared as a silhouette against the dimly lit sky. After a few minutes, it sailed down to the ground where it toyed with some debris or possibly prey. We could not see. All this time, we marvelled at the bird's apparent unconcern for our presence.

We moved to within 15 feet. The owl spent a few more minutes fussing over something on the ground. Then silently on huge wings it lifted ponderously into the air and flew up the shoreline, out of sight. We ran to the car in pursuit. As we drove, I tried to answer my brother's many questions. How did I know it was a great gray owl? Where did it come from? What are its habits? Its history?

The great gray owl is identified by its large size and round head. It lacks the feathered "ear tufts" or "horns" which characterize the great horned owl. At close range there is no mistaking this rare bird. Its most outstanding feature is its large, almost perfectly circular face. The facial discs consist of a pattern of



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concentric circles. The beak and eyes are bright yellow. Although the eyes are large, they seem to be lost in the immense face. Another key to identification is the prominent dark chin-spot beneath the beak. The bird is an overall ashy gray with black and white interspersed. Many of the wing feathers are heavily barred. The legs are well feathered, right down to the toes and needle-sharp talons. The tail is quite long for an owl, up to 12 inches. This is a large owl with an overall body length of 24 to 33 inches and a wingspread of 54 to 60 inches. Actually, the body of the bird is relatively small, weighing considerably less than the great horned owl. It owes its large size to its incredibly dense plumage.

One would think that a bird of this size would hunt rather large prey. But, in fact, the great gray preys on mice, moles, rats and other small rodents. Rarely, if ever, does it procure animals as large as a cottontail rabbit. In contrast the great horned owl, although smaller than the great gray, is a far more powerful and aggressive bird, tackling cottontails and larger birds and mammals with ease. Although most owls are nocturnal, the long hours of sunlight encountered in the far North have caused the great gray to adapt to a partially diurnal existence. Actually, this owl can be active at any hour of the day and night, but restricts most of its hunting to the low light intensity of early dawn and dusk. Its hunting technique consists chiefly of perching silently, then gliding down on noiseless wings to capture its prey. Small prey, such as mice, are swallowed whole. Indigestible fur and bones are regurgitated later as a compact pellet, a common trait of all owls.

This rare bird usually inhabits more northerly regions—i.e., areas just south of the land of the midnight sun, parts of northern Canada, and our far northern state of Alaska. It breeds and lives out its life in dense, remote woodlands. Its sporadic migrations southward are determined by population fluctuations of small rodents in their northern homes. When these population explosions occur, the owl wanders southward in search of prey. The hazards encountered on these southward migrations are many. Storms and feral cats and dogs

take their toll. But by far its worst enemy is man. The great gray is a trusting and docile bird which can be approached quite closely. Some have actually been captured by hand. Owing to its large size and slow ponderous flight, it makes an especially tempting target for any would-be hunter. This bird, as do all birds of prey, plays a vital role in keeping rodent populations in check. Killing one of these magnificent birds is a shameful waste indeed.

As little as 25 years ago the great gray was almost common in its northern homes. But when the owl was thought to be preying on valued fur animals, its fate was sealed. Trappers and hunters shot the great bird on sight—not a difficult task because the owl's placid nature made it easy for man to come within easy killing range. This continuous killing, coupled with rapid habitat destruction, devastated the species to the point that it is now a rarity to view this bird in

its native northern territories. To see one on Long Island is even more extraordinary. The last known recorded sighting of a great gray owl on Long Island was in December 1902. As time goes on, fewer and fewer people will be privileged to see this rare and magnificent owl from the far north.

Following the shoreline in pursuit of our great gray owl, we came upon a small marsh. There on a dead snag out on the marsh was the shadowy form of the great gray. Apparently it was foraging along the tree-lined shoreline of this quiet little cove in Lloyd Harbor. The owl took wing again—its huge sails carrying it out over the marsh. It was soon joined by a crow which performed the task so common to its breed—harassing owls and large raptors. In an attempt to elude the diving crow, the great gray headed for the dense trees in a residential section.

We soon arrived at the spot where

*Great Gray Owl photographed  
Feb. 3, 1979 at De Pauville, N.Y.  
by Charles H. Riley*





we judged the owl had entered the trees. Although we scanned the leafless trees, we saw not a sign of our great gray. We parked the car and walked up and down the road searching the trees. The results were fruitless. We had first seen this owl before daybreak. Now the sun shone brightly on this clear January morning. Cars and buses were already busily driving up and down the road. We were just about to give up when our attention was drawn by a group of crows making a ruckus over something in a cedar grove. I was sure that it was our owl. I started up a driveway leading towards the cedar grove, only momentarily slowed by a "Beware of Dog" sign. I could not see into the cedar grove which was on an adjacent property. Frustrated, we hurried back to the car, drove up a back road and parked. After negotiating a chain-link fence, we arrived at the cedar grove.

There was our owl, perched no more than ten feet up in a sparse cedar. The noisy crows spied us and quickly departed, leaving the owl in peace. We moved closer, inwardly fuming every time our feet snapped a dead twig. At any moment I expected the owl to swivel its head around, spot us and then take wing. But not this owl. When we were within 10 feet it turned its round head, eyed us curiously, and then unconcernedly turned away. We finally stood directly beneath the tree with the owl only four feet over our heads. The large



*Drawing by author*

*This owl has a very flat profile*



yellow eyes stared at us with only the slightest indication of alarm. The bird tensed momentarily as if to take wing. But then fluffed its feathers against the cold, settled down and turned its head away from us once again. Now I had to actually clap my hands to gain the bird's attention. After only a brief moment of viewing this bird at such close quarters, we retired quietly to our car, leaving the great gray peacefully perched in the cedar grove.

We then headed home with the great feeling of having witnessed something that few people will ever get to see. If all went well for our owl, if it escaped the perils that its winter home offered, it would be winging its way northward by March.



**Michael Zunno** of East Northport has an A.A.S. degree in natural resources conservation from SUNY Morrisville. Several of his wildlife sketches were chosen for the Cold Spring Harbor Nature Conservancy 1977 calendar, and he received the Huntington Township EPA Outstanding Wildlife Illustrations Award. He spent the summer of 1978 as a master plan intern for the Nature Conservancy. He plans to continue his education in wildlife at Cornell.



*Great Gray Owl*

by Wayne Trimm