



Great Gray Owl

Depauville, N.Y.

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PEOPLE AND GREAT GRAY OWLS

MAXWELL C. WHEAT, JR.

The excitement that greeted some 250 Great Gray Owls that moved down into the Northeast last winter (40 of them in New York State) was accompanied by considerable criticism of the behavior of humans when rare birds show up—especially that of the birders who come by the hundreds. A restless concern in the birding community in recent years erupted with the arrival of the once-in-a-lifetime predators from the thick, dark, northern forests.

It burned across the three-column headline in the *New York Times* of February 12, 1979: "Birds and Environs Reported Harmed by Overzealous Throngs of Watchers." In the story's lead paragraph, reporter Bayard Webster said several ornithologists themselves agreed that the "tremendous growth in the numbers of American bird watchers in the last ten years has meant harm in many cases to both the birds and their habitats"

Webster continued that "Some overzealous bird watchers, in efforts to get a closer look at an avian visitor, have thrown objects at a rare owl to see it fly, played birdsong tapes that confuse birds and disrupt their normal activities, frightened birds by using flash cameras a few feet away from them, and trampled plants and damaged trees, often on private property."

He cited two examples that birders have talked about the last couple of years. One involved a Boreal Owl in Massachusetts. "It was lifted from its roost and had some feathers plucked out by a curious bird watcher," Webster wrote.

The other example involved a Great Gray Owl that was discovered about two years ago on a tree farm in Berkshire, Massachusetts. "It attracted droves of bird watchers who trampled the landowner's tree seedlings, knocked down some wooden fences and cut his barbed-wire fences in their efforts to find the bird. The owner was about to shoot the owl to get rid of the watchers, but the owl moved away in the nick of time."

Undoubtedly as a result of this syndicated article, Robert S. Arbib, Jr., Editor of *American Birds*, received calls from reporters as far away as California asking about the "harm" birders were causing. At this point he felt that this image of birder recklessness was spreading far beyond the bounds of actuality. "We get all the stories about the bad actors like someone pulling out feathers of a Boreal Owl," he

said. But with this year's Great Grays, he pointed out, "Everybody showed a good deal of restraint."

Arbib was talking about congregations of birders and members of the general public at many places where these owls appeared. Incomplete records at this writing indicate that New York State alone had one Great Gray Owl in the Rochester area, two around Oswego, 14 in the Watertown region, 17 in the Capital District, which covers Albany, Schenectady, Rensselaer and Saratoga counties, two north of that including one just off the Northway near the interchange for Plattsburgh, and two on Long Island.

Arbib was backed up by birding leaders and personnel of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation everywhere in the State, when questioned by this writer. Both birders and members of the general public came off well. "We had no problems," said Senior DEC Wildlife Biologist Walton B. Sabin of Albany County.

Sabin's comment covered even a Great Gray that stationed itself in trees alongside the "Golden Arches" of a McDonald's fast-food store at a shopping center at Clifton Park in Saratoga County. It was checked out by both a DEC game officer and later by a state police patrol. The management of the store took the phone number of a birder to call if trouble arose. No call came in and the bird was reported to have stayed a couple of days.

Probably the worst incident involved a farmer near Depauville in Jefferson County who could not get into his field to spread manure because cars belonging to people watching a Great Gray were parked alongside the road blocking his way. This was reported by Edward "Ted" Smith, Senior Wildlife Biologist in the Watertown DEC office.

"There was at least one whole month of owl fever that affected birders and media alike," said Robert P. Yunick of Schenectady, one of the operators of the Dial-a-Bird telephone reporting service conducted by the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club for the Capital District. With all that, Yunick could say, "I know of no incidents causing ill feelings."

"Even though some birds were on private property," he said, "there was cooperation between viewers and landowners." For example, take the first Great Gray to come close enough to civilization to cause excitement, a bird "overseeing" a construction site at Rotterdam near Schenectady. Permission was obtained from the company for viewers to use its employee parking lot. This lot accommodated the 50 to 100 cars of the people who came for each of the few following days that the owl remained. It was reported to have been

watching the men work for a week before being reported to birders.

"We had no traffic problems. We're far enough away from New York for that," Yunick said. "The only action our club took was to report the sightings with Dial-a-Bird. . . other than for the reporting and verifying of reports that our club undertook, all other activities were conducted by individuals on an individual basis. We did not need traffic directors, negotiators, appeasers or whatever." He was referring to Lloyd Harbor on Long Island where traffic directors and negotiators were enlisted, but no "appeasers."

The Lloyd Harbor owl was discovered by David McNicholas as he drove off for work on the rainy morning of January 8. He saw crows harassing a "Great Horned Owl" in a tree except that there were no ear tufts. McNicholas hurried back home, checked his bird guides, noted the white "mustache" and black "goatee" and phoned his uncle, wildlife photographer Adrian Dignan of Freeport, "How would you like to see a Great Gray Owl?" Dignan immediately called Harry Darrow, a wildlife photographer in Westchester County. Later that morning, both men were on the scene taking the first pictures of this owl. The trek to Lloyd Harbor was on.

It was practically in Mrs. Sallie Ruppert's front yard. A former president of the Huntington Audubon Society, she is known for the bird rehabilitation center she operates at her home. She saw problems as did Thomas H. Davis of Woodhaven, who operates the Metropolitan area's Rare Bird Alert, sponsored by the Linnaean Society of New York and the National Audubon Society.

A look at Lloyd Harbor tells you why. It is located along an eight-mile, two-lane, winding road that runs from a main highway to the north shore on Long Island Sound, curves around a salt marsh and juts back inland into a wooded residential area before ending. Davis and Mrs. Ruppert envisioned a messy traffic snarl.

It is a community of spacious, high-income homes. There could be influential people, maybe even newspaper editors who could deliver plenty of publicity about birders trespassing and trampling their property. "I did not want to see birding hurt in my region," Davis said.

Then there was the safety of the bird itself. After all, at a top size of 33 inches, with a five-foot wing span, the Great Gray is the largest of the owls. Indeed, it even looks heavier than it is because of its unusually thick and fluffy plumage. It actually does not weigh much more than the 24-inch Barred Owl. Add to this conspicuousness the fact that it is a diurnal hunter because there are long periods of day-



*Great Gray Owl Watchers, Lloyd Harbor, N.Y.
January 14, 1979*

Thomas H. Davis

light in much of its natural range. Finally, as people learned this year with many of the owls, this bird does not readily retreat from humans unless some eager photographer inches too close. Even then the bird may only fly off to a nearby tree. It can be a sitting or slow-moving target.

Would crowds as well as media publicity attract someone eager to pull a trigger? Davis even questioned putting the bird on the RBA tape. Finally, he went ahead, but he phoned neighboring bird-report operators asking them not to advertise the bird. There was some irony here. They would all have an abundance of Great Graysto report soon.

Then Davis and Mrs. Ruppert went to the Lloyd Harbor police to advise them of the presence of a large owl that would transform their village into a birding Mecca that weekend. They encouraged the police to be generous with tickets for cars parked along the side of the road and Davis announced this fact on his tape.

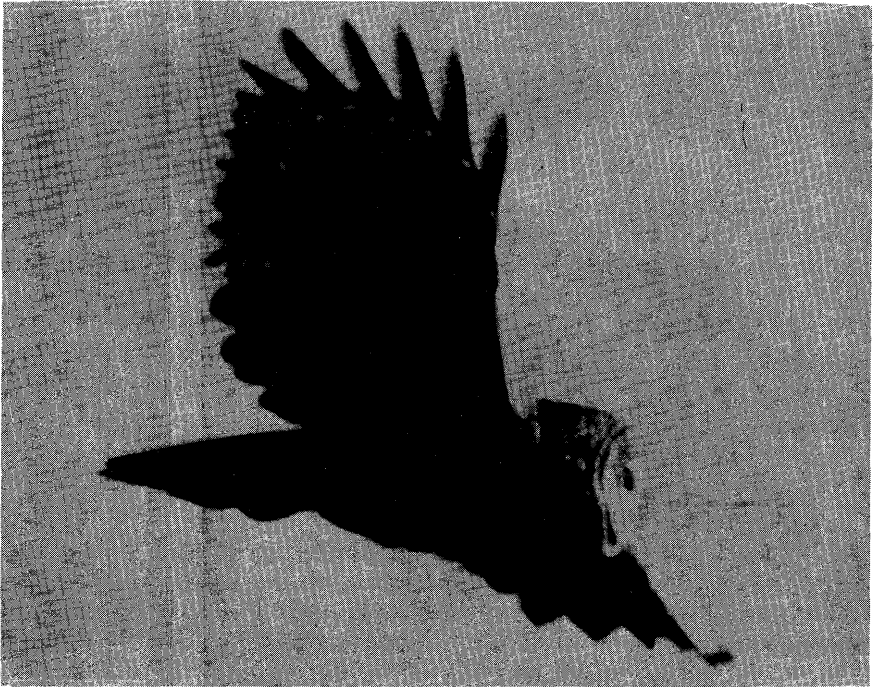
There was a break, as far as parking was concerned, in the two big parks in Lloyd Harbor, Caumsett State Park and Target Rock National Wildlife Refuge. Officials of both offered their parking areas. Mrs. Ruppert and William J. Kolodnicki enlisted a dozen volunteers to direct birding traffic to these parking fields and to operate "bird shuttles," driving people to and from the owl. They did this for three weekends, until the owl moved into the 1,475-acre Caumsett State Park and stayed there. This relieved the pressure. People then could only park there and walk, sometimes a long way, to see it.

The peak weekend for the Huntington club volunteers was the first one, particularly that Saturday when more than 200 persons came, according to Kolodnicki's estimate. There was some concern that day when birders tended to move out onto the salt marsh and trample it as they trained their binoculars and telescopes on a large oak near the edge, where the owl was perched. The only real trouble involved a teen-aged photographer who almost got next to the bird before Mrs. Ruppert yanked him away by the arm.

In the subsequent weeks, there were three traffic jams caused by cars parked opposite each other on both sides of the road. A fire engine could not have gotten through. Only then did police issue considerable numbers of summonses. Otherwise, they seemed reluctant to ticket the birders, Mrs. Ruppert said, although there were times when she and Davis were encouraging them to do so to relieve congestion.

During the early weeks, Davis leaned hard on observer discipline,

saying on one recording, for example, "The owl has been harassed on several occasions, especially by non-birders attracted by newspaper publicity" and "a number of birders from out-of-state descended on the area and blithely trespassed through private property and the adjacent salt marsh." It was these strong messages and the discussion they provoked that led to a *New York Times* article saying that the Rare Bird Alert "has stopped giving the exact location of uncommon birds sighted in local areas." Actually, this only happens when the rarity is on private property or a fragile environmental area, and this has long been the policy.



*Great Gray Owl in flight, Lloyd Harbor, N.Y.
January 1979* *David P. McNicholas*

With the relaxation in tension following the owl's taking up what amounted to permanent winter residence in the state park and the fact that nothing serious was happening to it, Davis in retrospect was able to see the experience positively. "There might have been some trespassing," he said referring to a time when the owl took itself to



*Salt Marsh, Lloyd Harbor, frequented by
Great Gray Owl during early part of stay.*
January 1979 Thomas H. Davis

some trees on a side street. "The residents might have been temporarily angry. But they were proud that their street had been picked by the owl."

"To judge the impact of the Lloyd Harbor Great Gray Owl fairly, one must take into account the greater number and more widespread network of persons watching birds, the various 'Rare Bird Alert' telephone hotlines, and upgraded news-media coverage than existed even ten years ago," Davis wrote this writer. " 'Rare' birds are being discovered today in places seldom visited a decade ago—Rockland Lake, Portville, and the south end of Tupper Lake, to name a few. The Rare Bird Alerts enable information to be shared rapidly, and the media have begun to give birding intelligent coverage, which stimu-

lates increased public interest in our activity. A further factor was the 'mythological' nature of this bird, an owl, and the rarest and largest one at that.

"As the Editor of the New York Rare Bird Alert, I reacted to the Lloyd Harbor Great Gray Owl quite apprehensively, being well aware of the above factors. I sensed this report would excite as much attention locally as have Ross' Gull, Steller's Eider and others throughout the Northeast. My RBA announcements editorialized at length about exercising good manners and restraint in 'chasing' this bird. Newspaper stories reflected birders' concern for the bird's well-being and in not seeing it disturbed, while fueling public desire to also go and see 'The Owl.' In retrospect, I now believe I was more correct to say too much than too little, that visiting birders proved respectful to the owl and the local residents, and that the owl was not disturbed . . ."

If you could push all the expressions uttered by people seeing these owls into a hollow drum, then let the lid off, the joyous volume would lift the clouds out of the sky. "Oh, my goodness. Oh, oh, isn't that fantastic. Oh, I don't believe it," a woman kept saying on first seeing the Lloyd Harbor owl in a tree. "Magnificent. Really something," said 13 year-old David McWilliams who came one day with the Junior Audubon Club of Samoset Junior High School in Ronkonkoma, N.Y. It was the first wild owl for William Raybold, a new birder from Sellersville, Pennsylvania. He had come with six others in a van operated by Rick Mellon of Morrisville, Pennsylvania, who conducts weekend commercial tours to see rare birds and other wildlife. "I was just delighted. It was on my ten most wanted list," said John Ginaven who came three times from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, before finally seeing it. "When you first see him, you are overwhelmed by his presence," declared Kenneth McDermott of Newburgh, N.Y., President of the Edgar Mearns Bird Club, adding, "I can't believe it. I hate to leave him."

One can imagine the letdown these people would have felt if they had heard that on March 17, more than a month after the owl had last been recorded on February 10, a dead Great Gray Owl was found on the beach at Centerport, two miles from Lloyd Harbor. Mrs. Louise Marshall, who found it, turned it over to Mrs. Ruppert to keep until it could be autopsied. "It's sort of a sad ending," Mrs. Ruppert was quoted as saying in the story in *Newsday*. "He was the bird of the century. We thought he had long since flown north."

After the story appeared, Mrs. Ruppert received a call from Mrs. Ceil Stepanian whose property borders Caumsett State Park. She re-

ported a Great Gray Owl outside her window and that it had been there for days. When Mrs. Ruppert saw it she figured happily it had to be the old owl friend of Caumsett. As of this writing the "old friend" was last seen, in this case by Mrs. Stepanian, on March 28.

Not so fortunate were several of the other owls. They were picked up dead or injured. A number of these were shot. In North Lawrence, St. Lawrence Co., Norman F. Newtown, 59, paid \$27.50 in "civil compromise" after pleading guilty to shooting a Great Gray Owl. He faced a maximum fine of \$250 when he appeared before Town of Brasher Justice Jeremiah Mahoney. According to the newspaper account, the court settled for the lesser fine in hopes that the publicity would discourage Newtown from hunting owls in the future. To this writer it would seem that the modesty of the fine would offer little in the way of a deterrent.

Four or five dead Great Gray Owls had been brought to the DEC wildlife station at Delmar. Pathologist Ward Stone could not remember exactly how many and said he did not have the help to check and that he was too busy with an investigation.

As of this writing, two Great Gray Owls that had been shot seemed to be on the way to being released. One was at the facility of veterinarian Dr. Edward Becker of Guilderland, N.Y., and the other was at the home of Mrs. Marcia Kent, a bird rehabilitator in Berne. Mrs. Kent, who is employed as a dispatcher for the DEC, was making plans to have them relayed in flight cages up to the northern border for release. This would be done by having a conservation officer in one region transport them to a conservation officer in the adjoining region and so on.

Nobody blamed the widespread media publicity (the birds made it on television news programs in Schenectady, for example) for these shootings. In fact, it was generally accepted that the public attention involving the large numbers of people coming to see the birds may well have kept would-be killers from destroying more of them.

In conclusion, a restless question about birder conduct had reassuring answers. The public also earned high marks except for a few unfortunates who do not know how to enjoy life without destroying it. As Robert Arbib summed it up: "Relations between birders and local people were very good. Residents welcomed the birds. In fact, more people had their eyes opened to the wonders of the avian world."

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