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**There are owls among us
Birds I View
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Great horned owl (photo: Rick West)

Though we ever so rarely see them and only seldom hear them, there are owls among us. In our forests, on our barrens and in our nursery rhymes, children's books and movies. We can conjure up impressions of wise old owls and we group them in aggregations known as a parliament.

Their captivation comes through their eyes. While most birds have eyes on the sides of their heads, owls have large symmetrical facial eyes. An owl's unencumbered head on stare causes pause and reflection - it is unusual to have such a direct encounter with a wild animal.

Eight species of owl occur on the island of Newfoundland. Five of them nest here – the great horned owl, hawk owl, short-eared owl, boreal owl and northern saw-whet owl. The snowy owl is a migrant from northern Labrador, Quebec and the Canadian arctic. Some linger into spring and even a few are still around in summer while early birds arrive in the fall, making

snowy owls essentially year round birds. The long-eared owl and the barn owl are extremely rare visitors with only a few known occurrences.

Some owls like the short-eared, the snowy and the hawk owl are active during the day. Snowy and the short-eared owls inhabit the open barrens and are the owls most frequently seen. The mottled tawny short-eared owl has a long winged buoyant flight that has earned it the local name "loper". The diurnal hawk owl prefers open forests, bogs and clear cuts. As its name suggests it has a rapid hawk-like flight pattern often swooping up to perches atop trees and poles in the open.

The great horned with its deep stuttering nocturnal hoots is the most frequently heard owl. The small boreal owl has a tooting call that sounds like a repetitive hollow whistle and that is frequently misidentified as a winnowing snipe and vice versa. At times boreal owls call during the day. The tiny saw-whet owl is smaller than a robin scarcely eight inches in length. It too has a tooting call like the boreal owl though higher pitched.

Each of the owl that I have encountered over the years are as poignant as if they occurred yesterday. In the White Hills – a snowy flying just above my head was a silent brilliant mirage moving through a steely overcast gray. A boreal owl that was not seen but called incessantly throughout a sunny afternoon on Baccalieu Island. A great horned owl perched high in the branches of a tall spruce at Voisey's Brook that we skied beneath unaware until our husky alerted us to the watcher above. The bird stared down with a nonchalance of – "don't bother me I'm napping". I can still see and hear a short-eared flying back and forth along the road to Cape Freels while clapping its wings over its back with loud rifle-like cracks trying to enamour a mate.

My most frightening experience, actually one of the most frightening of my life, occurred in the Brigantine Wildlife Refuge in southern New Jersey where I was living on an island with other students in a large abandoned light-keepers' house. On a very dark cloud-shrouded night while setting a minnow trap in a salt marsh stream to get food for gull chicks I was raising, I was stopped "dead in my tracks". A blood-curdling screams from directly overhead caused every hair on my body to stand and I froze like a frightened mouse. Casting my light upward and seeing the huge white open wings of an angry owl on attack mode was staggering. A barn owl nesting nearby was keeping my intrusion away from his owlets. Every time after that when I walked by that site at night I held a long stick overhead and kept a low cowering profile.

Surprisingly and in view of their relative obscurity, flashes of owls are often seen in headlights and they are frequent road-kills. The tarmac provides a good surface for attacking scurrying rodents, and those options are even better when headlights illuminate the road. But the unforeseen risks can be lethal, as evidenced by the mounted great horned owl in my office at MUN which arrived circuitously from a road kill in Ontario.

My most recent owl encounter came from Rich Nugent who had a tiny saw-whet owl slam with a loud thug into the side of his vehicle as he was driving on St. Thomas line in St. Philips just after dusk on March 25th. It was a tragic demise for a magnificent little predator.

So if you listen at night and this is the best time as the owls are courting and mating, if you are lucky or even unfortunate to encounter an owl on the road, you will know that there are owls among us.

Birds in the Area

Red-breasted mergansers have been moving along the coast and were seen in Portugal Cove and Musgrave Harbour. In early April, Jim Brokenshire noted the power and perseverance of a merlin fighting and dipping into winds and snow at Outer Cove.

Courting, singing and squabbling are on the rise. In Portugal Cove, a pair of hairy woodpeckers have cavorting about the lower meadows of Beachy Cove Mountain, and evening grosbeaks and purple finches are making noise. Mourning doves have been celebrating spring at Gordon Butt's place on Tucker's Hill, and a flock of red crossbills have been wintering at Chantelle Burke's feeder by Healy's Pond.

The first robin showed up at our place on 4 April likely assisted by the mega-winds from the southwest. The few that are about are indeed having a difficult time trying to cope with frozen ground and snow. Hopefully they will survive. The first local arrival of a fox sparrow came from Wendy Decker on Bennett's Road in Portugal Cove on 2 April. The spring parade has become.

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