

NATURE NUGGETS
A BIRDING FAVORITE: OWLS OF EASTERN NORTH AMERICA
MARTIE DAVIS, HAGAN 1956-1967

Sandy and Barb have again asked me to write “Nature Nuggets” for the Hagan Newsletter. Campers who know me well know that I really enjoy doing this as it gives me an opportunity to write about things that I truly am passionate about. What started when I was DP of Nature (the first time!) grew into something that has brought me pleasure for my entire life!

I have always considered myself a Naturalist with broad interests, but I am especially fond of Birds. More recently, I have developed a parallel interest in Photography, and it is probably no surprise that I have combined Nature, and especially Birds, with Photography. Over the years I have managed to amass a huge library of my own photographic work. I will be drawing heavily from this to illustrate the “Nature Nuggets” topics I hope to share with Campers this year.

People often ask me, “What is your favorite bird?” The short answer is that I really don’t have a favorite. At various times I find myself particularly enamored by some specific bird. Sometimes this actually is a single individual bird whose life somehow intersected with mine in a special way. In a future “Nature Nuggets,” I expect to share one of these with you. Over time – sometimes even day to day – my favorite bird changes. Most often my favorite bird is really a group of birds. Considered this way, Owls are never far from the top of my list. Winter is a wonderful time to think about Owls, so let’s kick off NATURE NUGGETS for this new year with a look at the Owls that are found in Eastern North America.

There are two owls that occur in the northern-most parts of the Eastern United States. These are the **Hawk Owl** and the **Great Gray Owl**.



These are birds of the far north boreal forests. One year, Polly and I drove to Duluth, Minnesota in the dead of winter. This was the jumping off point for a birding excursion into one of those forests. It was there that we saw both of these magnificent birds. I recall seeing the **Hawk Owl** first and mistaking it for a hawk based on the way it was perched high up on a tree branch. The **Great Gray Owl** we saw during a raging snow storm in the Superior National Forest. The bird was sitting silent, aloof and majestic on a fence post eyeing the group of birders nearby.

There is one other owl that normally lives way to the north of both Indiana and Pennsylvania. This is the **Snowy Owl**.



In some winters this owl finds the food supply in Canada deficient. During these winters, campers might see a **Snowy Owl** further south in Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania. The **Snowy Owl** likes to sit in farm fields looking for prey.

The **Northern Saw-whet Owl** is an interesting bird that seeks out coniferous forests. One was spotted in an Indianapolis park in a Cedar Tree. The birder who found this tiny owl was convinced that the bird preferred Cedar trees above all others. So, he proceeded to search all the Cedars in this large park, eventually turning up this bird.



In our area we also find **Long-ear** and **Short-ear** owls.



Long-eared Owls are lanky owls that often seem to wear a surprised expression thanks to long ear tufts that typically point straight up like exclamation marks. These nocturnal hunters roost in dense foliage, where their camouflage makes them hard to find. They forage over grasslands for small mammals. In the winter these birds are seen at the Indianapolis National Airport where they apparently find suitable habitat including their preferred prey.



Short-eared Owls are medium-sized owls with rounded heads. The "ears" mentioned in their name are difficult to see. They hunt during daylight, flying low over short vegetation. They appear moth-like when they fly. The **Short-eared owl** is endangered throughout the Eastern United States.



The **Barn owl** is a medium sized owl with a distinctive, large head with a white, heart-shaped face and small dark eyes. The **Barn-owl** is endangered throughout our area. Polly and I once enjoyed seeing a family of young Barn-owls looking out from their nest in the loft of a barn! Unfortunately, I did not have my camera.

The **Eastern Screech Owl** is fairly common through the Midwest and the East. This bird can appear as a red morph or a gray morph.



Polly and I saw this little red morph while birding in a State Park along Lake Erie in Ohio. It was sitting right out in the open. For the most part it was silent but could be seen easily if you knew right where to look. One of the things that makes birding fun is searching out and seeing the birds that are right there waiting to be found. Owls are like that!

The last two owls that occur in this area might be the most familiar to folks who live in the Eastern United States. The first of these is the **Barred Owl**.



At night it is not uncommon to hear the call of the **Barred Owl**. She seems to be saying, “Who Cooks for You? Who Cooks For You-all.” Those who came to the last reunion may recall that we did hear this owl on our Owl Prowl. **Barred Owls** mainly nest in large-diameter deciduous trees, but you may be able to attract a pair to a nest box that is suitable in size and is hidden by camouflage. They usually mate and begin nesting at this time of year.

The last owl in our area is the **Great Horned Owl**.



The call of this owl may be familiar to campers. She is sometimes known as the “Hoot Owl.” Her call may sound like: “Who’s Awake? Me Too.” Like the Barred Owl the **Great Horned** is fairly common in our area and if you listen you may hear them at night. They are well known to other birds, including the Barred Owl, as a predator. They are nocturnal but often seek food at dawn and dusk which are good times to spot one.

At the reunion this coming fall there will be another “Owl Prowl.” We will be playing the calls of the Screech, Barred and Great Horned Owls — in that order. If we played the sound of the Great Horned Owl first, it is quite likely that the Screech and Barred Owls will remain silent. Google the calls of any of these owls so you will be able to identify one by sound. Polly and I hope that you will be able to come on our Owl Prowl. It doesn’t last very long and is a fun time to enjoy the Owls common to our area.