

BIRD OF THE MONTH

By Melissa Sladek

The Great Gray Ghosts of the North

One dark, cloudy, fall morning I took a stroll through the forest. My dog and I favor a piece of state land that, other than taking some effort to get to, is full of trails and woods, a perfect place for a pair of explorers like us. The day was similar to many others we had enjoyed in this dark forest of grand fir, Douglas fir, and cedar trees. Yet, the day seemed different. Perhaps it was the massive clouds pressing down from above, or maybe it was the late fall chill in the air, but somehow the day seemed more mysterious...full of anticipation and suspense.

As we stepped into the forest, the air grew dense and the forest became unusually quiet, like all the forest critters had vanished in anticipation of something to come. The feeling quickened my steps, bringing me to a smaller, grass-covered trail that left the main one and headed toward an open clearing in the forest where, almost magically, the forest opens up to a large meadow full of tall grasses and horsetails. The first time I walked there I couldn't figure out why such an opening existed in such an otherwise thick forest. The mystery ended as I took a few steps and my shoes begin to sink into a quagmire of mud and water. Trees don't grow well in a bog.

The bog is covered with vegetation and is hard to see during the dry fall months. Old logs are strewn around the area and surrounding the clearing, stand several old snags, or standing dead trees. It is a rich habitat, full of life.

I had noticed a snag across the forest clearing. But it wasn't the snag that caught my eye this time. It was the creature perched on top...a massive gray figure staring directly at me. I was too far away to see it clearly so I leashed my dog and took careful, measured steps toward the snag.

We walked a few steps and stopped; the bird did not stir. A few steps more and still the bird sat. A little closer and the owl's neck stretched up. Its eyes showed its annoyance at our presence. I knew the right thing to do was to turn around, to leave the owl in peace. But I wanted to know what it was and although I felt quite certain it was the owl I had been longing to see, I had to be sure. A few more steps and the owl's eyes intensified, looking at me with anger. Then in one surreal moment, it seemed to heave itself off the snag, spread its massive wings, and without a sound, flew directly over me. An enormous Great Gray Owl flying literally above me!

I ran home, my dog not understanding why we cut our walk short. I took out my bird books and powered up the computer. I had always wanted to see

a Great Gray but realized I didn't know much about them. I never anticipated running into one in a commonly used forest in my backyard.

The Great Gray Owl, *Strix nebulosa*, is the largest *Strix* in North America with a length of 24-33 inches and wingspan of up to 60 inches. Although one of the world's largest owls, it appears more massive because of its bulky plumage. Amazingly, its actual body mass is at least 15% smaller than the Great Horned Owl but its fluffy plumage, long tail, and immense head give it a much larger appearance.



Great Gray Owls have largely dark gray plumage interspersed with bars and flecks of light grey and white. The owl's head consists of six or more heavily ringed facial disks, a yellow bill with a black patch below it, and a noticeable white "moustache" strip under the facial disks. Its bright yellow eyes appear small compared to its large head. Its legs are fully feathered.

The owl is incredibly large, yet is silent when flying. Also called the Great Gray Ghost, it has slow, deep, moth-like wing beats that allow it to fly without a sound but remain maneuverable in flight. It is even capable of flying between tightly packed trees.

The Great Gray Ghost, primarily nocturnal, will hunt in daylight, especially when nesting. Its main diet consists of voles and pocket gophers, but it also eats short-tailed weasels, snowshoe hares, and sharp-shinned hawks. From a perch listening and looking for activity below, the owl's asymmetrical ear openings allow it to detect its prey by sound alone and incredibly, it can hear, plunge, and grab prey from under the snow at depths of up to 15 inches.

Research led me to understand that this bog in a northern forest is exactly the habitat the Great Gray favors. Its range extends from boreal forests and wooded bogs in the far north to dense coniferous forests with montane meadows farther south in the Northern Rockies and Sierra Mountains.

Great Grays can become somewhat "tame" toward humans in the winter since they are concentrating on finding food...or perhaps its look of annoyance was real and I had ruined its morning hunt.

Either way, I felt sorry I had disturbed it, but also amazingly lucky that I had not only stood before it but also was directly underneath its massive, yet silent wings. The only thing that I missed was hearing its deep booming voice calling in a series of low, evenly spaced "hoos." But then, there's always next time. After all, the forest and bog are just a hop, skip, and a scramble away!