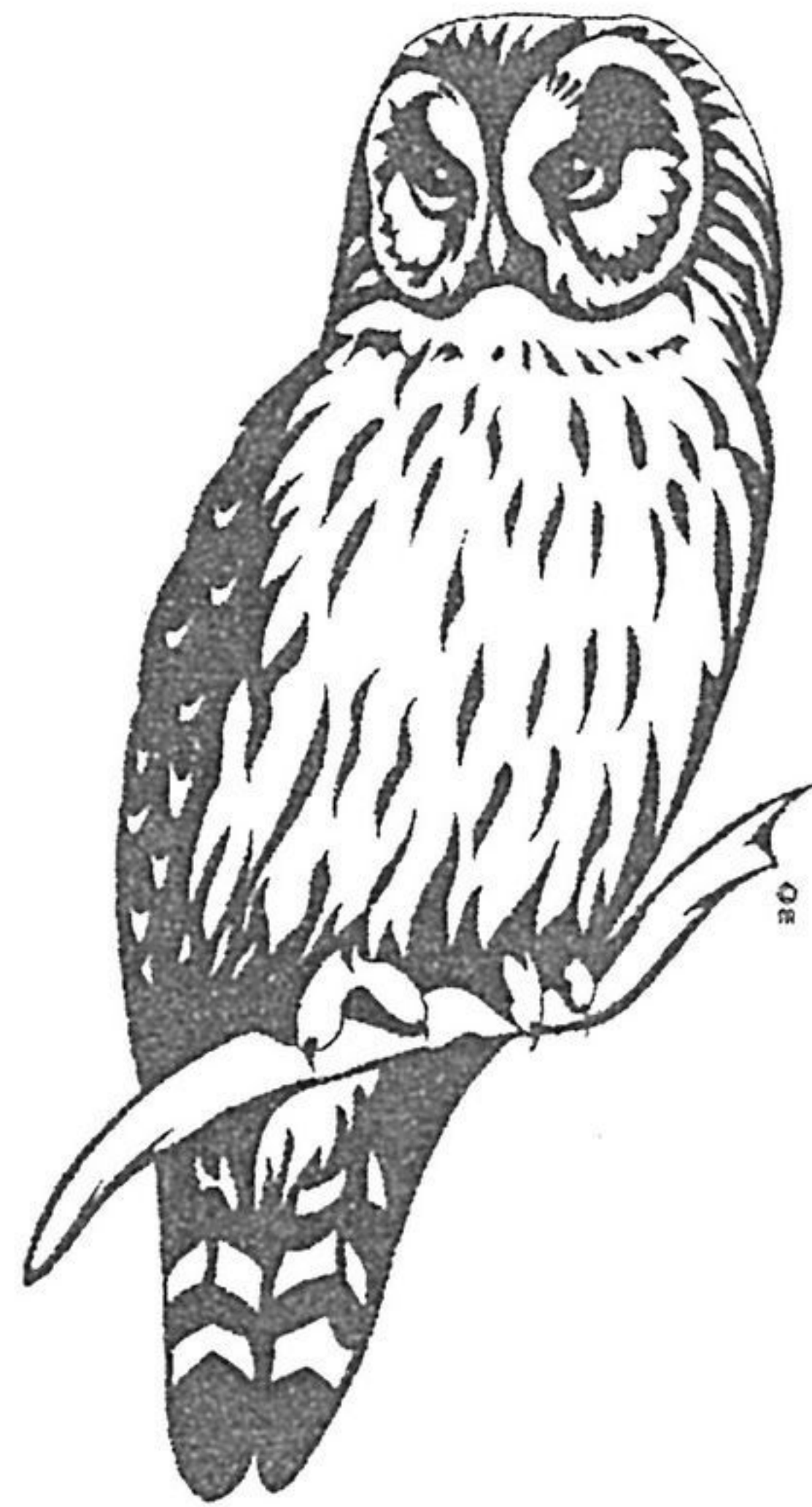


HOO,
HOO,
HOOS
THAT?



There's been a weird sound emanating from the woods surrounding the house these past few weeks. It's a kind of a long wail followed by a couple of gargling tremolo noises. It's a screech owl, and I've never seen one. In fact I've only seen three kinds of owls in my life.

Once, while timber cruising in the Peace River country in Alberta, we came upon a long abandoned lumber camp. Deserted places where humans used to live are kind of spooky, but it was in the middle of the day, so I pushed open the door to one of the old bunkhouses and stepped boldly in. There was a tremendous flapping, and several birds, as big as geese, flew from the rafters in a cloud of dust and debris and sailed one after another through one of the broken windows. My knees almost buckled in shock and terror. These birds were huge. I was frozen in terror and shock such that they could have plucked out eyeballs for hors d'oeuvres. So I saw my first family of great gray owls, the largest owls in Canada. They come around the Milford area in the winter, but I've never seen one. The local birders know where they are when they appear, though.

Fishing off Morrison's Point one morning, I noticed crows in paroxysms of excitement. They were mobbing a large owl, maybe twice the size of a crow. The owl seemed supremely disinterested in their behaviour, seeming to say, "Go to it, boys, but if you bug me too much I may just kill one of you for it." The owl, a Great Horned Owl, finally flew indolently off into some deeper woods and lost the bothersome crows.

If there is reincarnation, being born again as some kind of beast, I want to be a Great Horned Owl. A major attraction is that these fellows have no natural enemies. They have razor sharp talons and a beak that can

slice open a car license plate. Nothing stalks them. Nothing preys upon them. Certainly not cats. Great Horned Owls eat cats. A bird that hunts cats must be the idol of all songbirds. The Great Horned will eat just about anything. Mice, rabbits, groundhogs, muskrats, porcupines, birds including other owls, even fish. These owls have been seen wading around in shallow water when fish are spawning. They also prey on skunks. I read that a Great Horned Owl likes nothing more than to pounce upon a nice stinky skunk. Skunks are so darned confident with their unique odor defense, but the smell doesn't bother the Great Horned at all. A few skunks must have looked skyward at the last minute and thought, "He won't eat me. He won't eat me. Ooops! I think I've made The Big Mistake."

They're such successful hunters that habitat isn't important to them. Deep forest, coastlines, open country, it doesn't matter as long as there's food. They're found all over North America. They don't migrate, no need to. If the pantry becomes a bit empty, they move to another location where the pickings are plentiful. So my mind is made up. If I have a choice as to animal, I will be reincarnated into a Great Horned Owl.

The third owl I have seen is the Saw-whet. The Prince Edward Bird Observatory banded owls at Pointe Traverse this fall. Nets were set up in October, and banding went on until the wee hours of the morning. The results depended greatly on the weather.

Night 1 - 70 Owls

Night 2 - 2 Owls

Night 3 - 0 Owls

Night 4 - 54 Owls

Night 5 - 10 Owls

Lucky for me, I was present on Night 1. Saw-whet owls are a little bigger than a robin, only 5 inches

Continued on page 14

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