

Mid-winter outing offers birds-eye view

By MARION STREBIG
Federation of Ontario Naturalists

the small flock of robins I came across feeding on dried berries in a protected ravine. On the other hand, wanderers from the north, like the redpolls and siskins, have not yet appeared in any numbers.

With this in mind, a group of us went out last weekend to see what we could find. We were hoping to see some owls — and we did. We found a retiring owl of the deep woods, the Long-eared Owl.

Because it is exclusively nocturnal and roosts quietly during the day in dense foliage near the trunk, this owl is not commonly seen except during the winter. In that season it moves south and may gather in large flocks in woodlots.

We spotted our first Long-eared Owl in just such a place,

one which had been extensively reforested with white pine. It was comparatively easy to spot, perched in the open on a slender pine branch.

Because owls cannot rotate their eyes, nature has compensated by making the eyes extremely large and providing extra neck vertebrae so the owl can perform what looks like a 360-degree head swivel.

This owl fixed us with its eyes, watching us watch it. Its chestnut facial discs with buff slashes next to the eyes accentuated their

size. As we watched, it seemed to lengthen as though someone were pulling on the top of its head with an invisible string. Aside from this it was still.

The second owl was much harder to find. It was behaving the way Long-eared Owls are supposed to, tucking itself in by the main trunk. Perched on a snag, it became part of the snag by leaning out.

For some time we watched them from a respectful distance through our binoculars. Then someone moved forward suddenly and the smaller owl lifted on soundless wings and circled off into the woods. The other owl followed a few minutes later.

There were no other species of owls for us that day, not even a Great Horned Owl. But the woods were criss-crossed by the tracks of Ruffed Grouse.

Chickadees hung from the branches over our heads feeding and keeping up a companionable lisp. Blue Jays scolded from a distance, and a Brown Creeper searched the tree bark methodically for signs of life.

An emphatic 'pik' alerted us to the presence of a Downy Woodpecker, a scaled down version both in size and volume of the Hairy Woodpecker.

Along the side roads the little kestrel and the Red-tailed Hawk were active. Actually the Red-tailed Hawks were only perching on a variety of perches. One was using the top of a billboard as a perch from which to scan open country for prey.

The kestrels were more actively engaged in hunting, hovering and dropping into the snow. I actually saw a kestrel flying with a mouse dangling from one foot.

Oddly absent from perches in the open country were Snowy Owls. Ulrich Watermann, a professional falconer who is commissioned to keep Pearson International Airport free of birds, reports he has only trapped two Snowy Owls so far this season.

Most years by this time he would have taken a dozen. Ulrich traps the owls in German goshawk traps set on short poles. These are clam-shaped nets with a trigger. Unlike leghold or body-gripping traps, these capture the birds unharmed so they can be released again well away from the airport.

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For sale sign out as bait

By BRUCE STAPLEY

What do you do when you get so many inquiries from people wanting you to sell your property, you don't have time to operate the business?

If you're the top brass at G.M. Smith Ltd., whose 10-acre heavy transportation business in Gormley serves as the North American-wide company's headquarters, you throw a for sale sign out front.

According to company Vice President Rob Donaghey, real estate people, companies, investors and individuals have been approaching the company non-stop ever since it set up operation at Stouffville Road and Woodbine a year ago.

"It came to the point where it was getting in the way of business," says Mr. Donaghey. "So we decided to put up the sign and see what happened."

Mr. Donaghey says there is not really a set price being asked.

"It's more of a 'make us an offer' situation. If you put a price on it, you may end up settling for less than you might have been able to get."

Originally located on a 10-acre site on Hwy 7 at Kennedy Road since 1957, G.M. Smith's headquarters were moved to Gormley when traffic congestion began posing great problems for their heavy trucks coming in and out of the yard.

"We were the first business on Hwy 7 and Kennedy back in 1957," recalls Mr. Donaghey. "We paid less than \$100,000 for the property and a building."

While reluctant to divulge either the amount the property sold for, or how much the Gormley spot was purchased for, it can only be assumed with the recent boom in Markham and Gormley, both properties would have fetched a significant price.

"We bought in Gormley just when things were starting to go crazy," says Mr. Donaghey. "It was very busy in the area this past summer, and although it has slowed down a little, I think it will pick up again next summer."

Mr. Donaghey says the company will decide where to relocate the Gormley operation only after a deal is made.

"It's not exactly a high priority."

He says the sign will stay out front "for a couple of months."

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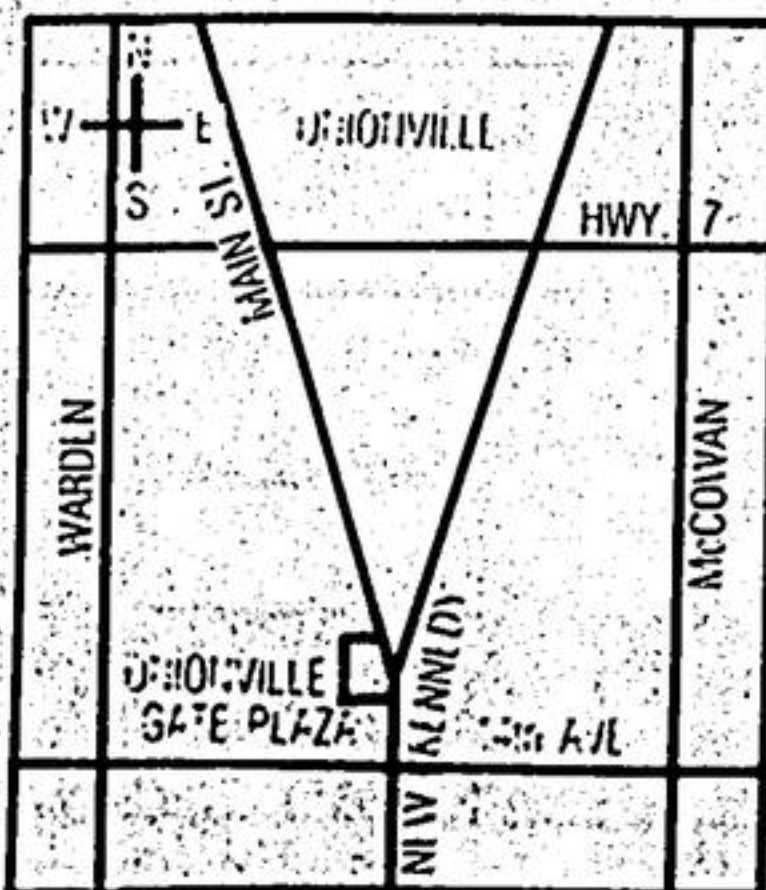
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