

The Great Gray Owl in Saskatchewan

By DR. STUART HOUSTON

The Great Gray Owl is our largest owl in terms of length, though its bulk is largely made up of the warm feathers that suit its northern habitat. To those people lucky enough to have seen one, it is one of the most picturesque and beautiful of all birds. E. T. Jones of Edmonton who, with Al Oeming, is a foremost authority on this species, said in 1954 that this bird appears to be following "close on the footsteps of the beautiful Whooping Crane. There is no doubt that the predations of man will eventually force the species into extinction."

The following unpublished records list seven specimens from six localities and sight records from six additional localities, adding considerably to our knowledge of this species in Saskatchewan.

There is a specimen in the Lund Wildlife Exhibit at Prince Albert. Gordon Lund states that this bird was collected perhaps in the late 1930's in the general area of Prince Albert.

A Great Gray Owl is mounted and on display in the office of Saskatoon Quick Freeze Ltd., 22nd St. West, Saskatoon. Charles Kelman, the manager, informs me that this bird was collected eight miles east and two miles north of Sylvania, Sask., probably in the latter part of July, 1951. Two other Great Grays were reported to be with it at the time.

A female Great Gray Owl, now mounted in the Sask. Museum of Natural History in Regina, was obtained by Dr. Tillie, at Watapi Lake, near the Alberta boundary, about 70 miles north of Pierceland, Sask., on March 29, 1952.

Early in the winter of 1955-56, Mr. Jack Chamberlain accidentally caught two Great Gray Owls in his traps at Candle Lake, Sask., while trapping for squirrel and weasel. One was already dead. The other put up such a battle when he tried to release it, that he had to shoot it. Both specimens were sent to John Hunter, Saskatoon taxidermist, and one was then given to the Sask. Museum of Natural History.

H. C. Clark of Usherville, shot two Great Gray Owls about January,



Great Gray Owl from Richardson's *Fauna Boreali Americana* (1831), photographed from the book by Stuart Houston.

1956, taking squirrels from his trap in the Porcupine Forest Reserve about eight miles south of Reserve Sask. One specimen was forwarded by Art McLean, regional game warden at Hudson Bay, via the Prince Albert Game Branch, to the provincial museum.

A Great Gray Owl was captured alive by R. B. Olson at his farm six miles east and one-half mile north of Pleasantdale, Sask. in the late winter or early spring of 1954. He had been sitting in the stubble and identified from Star Weekly picture one night. Next morning the bird was sitting on the corral fence and as Matt Olson attracted his attention from the front, Mr. Olson sneaked up behind and captured him by hand. The bird was sent to Al Oeming of Edmonton and provided the material on feather sequence and molt in thesis on the Great Gray Owl presented by Mr. Oeming for his M.S. degree at the University of Alberta. The bird is the only one in captivity in the world, and is in the Zoological

Park of the New York Zoological Society. In a letter of Sept. 9, 1957, Dr. John Tee-Van, the General Director, informed me that the bird is still alive and in very good condition.

Gordon Lund reports from Prince Albert that a Great Gray was sighted as recently as 1952 along the Saskatchewan River between Prince Albert and Fort a la Corne, and then apparently disappeared after the fall hunting season.

Billy Matthews of Nipawin saw three Great Gray Owls on Nov. 17, 1955, 14 miles north and two miles west of Love, Sask., and about six miles from the farm of Stuart Francis (where the Francis boys saw two Great Gray Owls in late November of the same year). The Owls seen by Matthews were all sitting on dead poplar stubs within 20 yards of the road, within half a mile of one another. Matthews saw another Great Gray in the top of a black spruce 20 miles northeast of Nipawin, on December 11, 1955.

After the photograph of the Great Gray banded in Saskatoon appeared in the Saskatoon Star-Phoenix of

January 7, 1956, two further sight records were received.

R. H. Wallis of Armley wrote that between Christmas and January 1, he had spotted the biggest and darkest owl he had ever seen, beside the Carrot River, two miles north and a mile west of Armley, S.W. $\frac{1}{4}$, sec. 24, twp. 48, range 15, W2. It had a white mark on the breast in the shape of a moustache. It was very tame and allowed him to approach within fifty feet.

Charles Devlin of Watrous observed a large owl three miles east of Young, Sask., about Dec. 29, 1955. It had a longer tail, no ears, open and shaggy feathers and a comical masquerade-like face. It was sitting on a fence post forty feet from the highway and was so tame that it didn't fly even when he got out of his car in front of it. As soon as he returned home, he consulted his two-volume "Book of Birds" of the National Geographic Society, and noted that his bird was identical with their painting of the Great Gray Owl.

A Great Gray Owl was observed with binoculars at 20 feet, by Anton



—Photo by A. F. Oeming

Great Gray Owl at five weeks, Rocky Mountain House, June 10, 1954



Great Gray Owl and friend, January, 1956

Waycheshen at High Hill, Sask. on Feb. 19, 1956. (High Hill is about ten miles northeast of Kelvington). Another Great Gray was noted on March 10, 1956 between High Hill and Kelvington.

Because of the scarcity of records, I carefully checked the literature to give the following summary of previous records:

The Great Gray Owl is listed by Richardson (1831) in his Introductory Table, as being "common, all the year" on the Saskatchewan, between Carlton and Cumberland, 1820-1827. He lists no dates or specimens for this area. However, Richardson found a nest with three young at Great Bear Lake, in what is now the Northwest Territories, on May 23, 1826. This may have been the first nest ever found. He kept the young for two months until they escaped.

Eugene Coubeaux of Prince Albert (1900), stated it to be a "very rare winter visitor. Only two seen and shot in five years."

Mitchell (1924), listed it as hypothetical: "Apparently rare winter visitant. A few recorded by George Lang during the winters of 1890, 1916 and 1917" (at Indian Head).

R. and D. Hooper (1954), give the following: "Seen three successive years in 1920's by W. A. Black, who

once saw about a dozen in one day."

The only other references are in the "Blue Jay," as follows:

A Great Gray Owl was taken in 1936 on the Assiniboine Indian Reservation south of Sintaluta, by Jack Wilson. The specimen was mounted and is now in Indian Head. The first museum specimen was taken in the winter of 1938 by R. D. Symons at Mountain Cabin, on the Carrot River, about 20 miles west of the Manitoba Saskatchewan boundary. It had been caught in a steel trap, starved and frozen to death. Another Great Gray Owl was identified from feet submitted by F. Missler, of Moosedale Sask. during the 1940-41 winter predator campaign of the Fish and Game League. (*Blue Jay*, Vol VI, No. 1, p. 11).

K. E. Baines of Tisdale shot a Great Gray in the fall of 1925. He found them fairly common near Prairie River in June and July of 1926. More recently, he has seen one twice in the winter at Leaf Lake northeast of Hudson Bay Junction (*Blue Jay*, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 20).

C. Stuart Francis shot and killed a Great Gray Owl, probably during the winter of 1939-40. It was sitting on a spruce limb about nine or ten feet from the ground, in a very dense and dark patch of black spruce and

ackpine along the valley of the Torch River (**Blue Jay**, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 4).

Billy Matthews saw a Great Gray near the northeast corner of the Fort la Corne Game Preserve, west of Nipawin, on Jan. 9, 1951 (**Blue Jay**, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 3).

Harry Anaka, Spirit Lake P.O., shot a male Great Gray at dusk on March 27, 1954, thinking it to be a Horned Owl. The specimen was for-

warded to the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, Regina, where it is now a study skin (**Blue Jay**, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 11).

A Great Gray Owl was trapped unharmed at the Beaver Creek Game Farm by Keith Thue, and banded by the writer on January 7, 1956 (**Blue Jay**, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 11).

To date we have no definite record of this species nesting in Saskatchewan.

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Notes on the Barred Owl and the Snowy Owl in Alberta

A summary of observations of the Barred and Snowy Owls made in Alberta from 1952 to 1957 by A. F. Oeming, President of the Edmonton Zoological Society)

INTRODUCTION

In 1955 A. F. Oeming submitted master's thesis to the Zoology Department of the University of Alberta entitled *Preliminary Study of the Great Gray Owl in Alberta*. This thesis was a report on a study of the Great Gray Owl carried on for four seasons (1952-1955) in the forest and muskeg areas of Alberta. During the study, there emerged interesting records of the occurrence and distribution of other species of owls in Alberta. Of particular interest, in view of additional later records sent to the BLUE JAY by Mr. Oeming, are the records of the Barred and Snowy Owls. The Snowy is a winter visitor in Saskatchewan as well as in Alberta, and its movements during the winter season merit study. For the Barred Owl, on the other hand, there are really no authentic Saskatchewan records. Perhaps the Alberta discoveries may spark an all-out search for the Barred Owl in Saskatchewan.

BARRED OWLS (*Strix varia*)

Previous to the Great Gray Owl study, only four records of the Barred Owl in Alberta were known to Mr. Oeming. During the investigation of the Great Gray, however, eleven records of the Barred Owl were added to the Alberta list. Six of these records were published by A. F.

Oeming and E. T. Jones in the *Canadian Field-Naturalist* (Vol. 69, pp. 66-67). All eleven records, of course, appear in the thesis. Since the submission of the thesis, Mr. Oeming has these two new records to report:

"April 27, 1957. While on a Grizzly Bear investigation trip I chanced to stop at the Imperial Lumber Camp at Kidney Lake, approximately 38 miles northwest of Fort Assiniboine. Ron Ashmore, foreman of the camp, informed me that he had the carcass of an owl which had entered his weasel trap and which he was unable to identify. The bird proved to be a Barred Owl. The bird was too badly decomposed to make a worthwhile skin.

June 15, 1957. While travelling by pack horse in the Tony Creek country west of the Little Smoky River, I picked up a Barred Owl breast feather on a cut line in heavily treed country. This is a completely wild area but unquestionably this feather came from a Barred Owl in the area."

The eleven records from the thesis and the two subsequent records indicate that the Barred Owl has a general distribution throughout Alberta. Its preference for heavy timber in remote areas has undoubtedly been the major reason for the fact that the bird had hitherto almost