

UNNECESSARY ELECTROCUTION OF OWLS

ROBERT GILLARD, Box 141,
Wynyard, Saskatchewan S0A 4T0

On July 28, 1975, I found the badly burned body of a fully grown young Great Horned Owl at the base of a power pole, four miles east and half a mile south of Wynyard. The owl had been carrying a freshly-killed snowshoe hare; evidently the hare had hung down far enough to contact the wire brace which ran from the top of the pole to the ground about 10 feet from the base. This made the contact that resulted in the electrocution of both. On July 25 the power had gone off for a few hours until the repairman came to restore it.

The owl came from a nest which I had found earlier in the spring on the same quarter section. It was in an aspen 35 feet from the ground and Dr. Houston had banded the owl and its nestmate on May 17. On the day of banding, the young were feeding on a Sora, a red-backed mouse and a snowshoe hare.

This was the second catastrophe at the same pole. On August 20, 1972, a young owl which had been the single occupant of a nest 40 feet up in a black poplar on the same quarter section was banded May 20 and met its death in exactly the same manner.

These power poles, as presently constructed, are death traps for owls. I am sure the brace could easily be lowered so that contact cannot be made simultaneously with both a live wire and the ground wire. The insulator is on the top of the pole and does not make for a good landing for owls. Large hawks and migrating eagles are also at risk.

Dr. Houston tells me that of 207 recoveries of his banded Great Horned Owls, at least 13 have been electrocuted (Can. Field-Nat., in press). In recent years, more have been electrocuted than have been reported shot, so that this is a problem of continuing importance, now that rural electrification is virtually complete.

Power corporations, both publicly and privately owned, are modifying their poles throughout much of the western United States, so that they will not readily electrocute large birds of prey. I would suggest that the Saskatchewan Power Corporation follow their good example. It would help the birds, but it would also help the power corporation, whose men often have service calls to restore power service after the "shorts" and "outages" from such accidents.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A similar situation exists in Manitoba (and presumably elsewhere) where R. W. Nero reports that Manitoba Hydro has frequently had to respond to power failures resulting from birds of prey, especially Snowy Owls, making the sort of contact described in the above article. A representative for Manitoba Hydro noted that Snowy Owls were safe when perched on top of the type of pole that presents this hazard, but that when they took flight sometimes their downward moving wings made the unfortunate contact that would complete the circuit, killing the bird and activating a circuit breaker. Field staff apparently regularly look for dead owls and other birds when investigating causes of such power failures. Gillard's plea for a change in structure of this type of power line support should receive wide application.

SASKATCHEWAN POWER'S EXPERIENCE

FRANK SWITZER,
Information Services,
Sask. Power Corporation,
2025 Victoria Ave.,
Regina, Saskatchewan
S4P 0S1

In reply to Mr. Gillard's article, we average approximately 100 recorded incidents of hawk and owl kills and about 100 crow and magpie kills, on power lines in Saskatchewan each year. Regional differences are obvious between the 12 superintendencies in Saskatchewan. The heavily wooded areas around Prince Albert and Nipawin average three kills of hawks and owls per year per superintendency; the parkland areas such as around Yorkton, average six