



Great Gray Owl. Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba, March, 1974.

Andrew Lindsay



# POSSIBLE INTRA-SPECIFIC KILLING BY A GREAT GRAY OWL

by ROBERT M. FISHER\*

On January 23, 1974, at 12:00 p.m., I observed a possible case of intra-specific "predation" by a Great Gray Owl. The location was 15 feet off Highway 93 (Lat. 117°26' Long. 52°27') at 5000 feet above sea level in Jasper National Park, Alberta. The ambient air temperature was about -3°C (26°F), with a southwest wind gusting to 20 mph.

The observation of a Great Gray Owl standing on top of a dead Great Gray Owl was made from a bus containing 20 students. Upon stopping the bus, the feeding bird flew off. Examination of the site did not reveal any signs of a significant struggle. The thin body of the dead owl was still warm. No blood was found, nor were broken bones or external hemorrhages present. A small area of skin had been opened on its breast, and there was a hole approximately 1.5 inches in diameter in the ear area. Feathers were scattered in small quantities downwind from the site.

This observation implies one of at least two things: 1) The owl was feeding on carrion or 2) The owl preyed upon an individual of its own kind.

The Great Gray Owl preys almost entirely on mice and voles.<sup>1 2 3 5 6 7 9</sup> In some cases birds have been found to constitute small portions of the Great Gray Owls diet: Common Crow,<sup>1</sup> Redpoll,<sup>4</sup> and Hazel Hen.<sup>8</sup> The taking of birds by Great Gray Owls must be assumed to be uncommon; of 4,026 prey items examined in their study of pellets, Mikkola and Sulkava found 1.1% avian remains, including finches,

adult and young game birds (Tetraonidae), two jays (*Garrulus glaudularis*) and a Tengmalm's Owl (*Aegolius funereus*).<sup>8</sup> In Canada however, Brunton and Pittaway have not observed the Great Gray Owl feed on birds.<sup>2</sup>

One could assume that the dead owl may have been hit by an automobile but park wardens informed us that the road had been closed to public travel up to this date because of danger from avalanches. We were the first travellers on it for some time, other than the wardens. This information and the lack of external hemorrhages suggest that the Great Gray Owl attacked and killed an individual of its own kind, possibly an individual diseased or starved to a point where the live bird responded to its abnormal behavior.

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<sup>1</sup>BENT, A. C. 1938. Life histories of North American birds of prey. Part 2. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 167. Dover edition, 1961.

<sup>2</sup>BRUNTON, D. F., and R. PITTAWAY. 1971. Observations of the Great Gray Owl on its winter range. Can. Field-Nat. 85: 315-322.

<sup>3</sup>CRAIGHEAD, J. J., and F. C. CRAIGHEAD, Jr. 1956. Hawks, owls and wildlife. D. C. Heath, Boston. 4th edition, 1969. 443 pp.

<sup>4</sup>FISHER, A. K. 1893. The hawks and owls of the United States. U.S. Dept. Agri.

<sup>5</sup>GODFREY, W. E. 1967. Some winter aspects of the Great Gray Owl. Can. Field-Nat. 81: 99-101.

<sup>6</sup>HÖGLUND, N. H., and E. LANSGREN. 1968. The Great Gray Owl and its prey in Sweden. Viltrevy 5: 363-416.

<sup>7</sup>LAW, C. 1960. The Great Gray Owl of the woodlands. Blue Jay 16: 14-16.

<sup>8</sup>MIKKOLA, H., and S. SULKAVA. 1970. Diet of Great Gray Owls in Fenno-Scandia. Birds 63: 23-27.

<sup>9</sup>NERO, R. W. 1969. The status of the Great Gray Owl in Manitoba, with special reference to the 1968-1969 influx. Blue Jay 27: 191-209.

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