

# RESPONSE OF A HAWK OWL TO A LURE

by B. M. FISHER\*

The Hawk Owl is a scarce resident in Alberta. It was formerly common but its numbers have been considerably reduced in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

On October 30, 1973, four students on an ecology field trip found a Hawk Owl in a black spruce-muskeg community, 2 miles N-NE of Looma, Alberta. (Lat. 53° 23'N, Long. 113° 15'W). We observed the owl between 3:00-4:30 p.m. on an overcast day with gusting winds, 20-30 mph. The temperature was about 4°C.

To lure the owl, a white string was tied around the neck of a dead Meadow Vole (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) which was thrown in the vicinity of the perched owl, then pulled across the ground erratically. A similar technique for studying hunting behaviour of Great Gray Owls proved successful using a study skin of a Meadow Vole.<sup>2</sup>

The owl first swooped down to within 5 feet of the ground and then straight up to a perch in a black spruce (*Picea mariana*). Dr. D. L. Pattie approached to within 50 yards of the owl and failed on three initial attempts to lure it. The owl was constantly turning in all directions and on a few occasions spotted the vole but instead of attacking, swooped down to within 8 feet of the ground and straight up to the perch in a black spruce directly above Dr. Pattie. It then had a better view of the moving vole but seemed reluctant to attack. From 50 yards away, I managed to attract the owl's attention

to the vole by alternating quick movements with short pauses. The owl immediately flew within 20 yards of me. Within 10 seconds it swooped down without a flap of its wings and with both legs extended, landed on the back half of the vole. The owl, 8 feet in front of me, was holding its wings out as if balancing itself. I pulled on the string; at this movement the owl struck the vole's head with two sharp thrusts of its beak. Then it picked up the vole with its beak and flew into the forest. However, the string became entangled in bushes and after several unsuccessful attempts to fly off with its "prey" the owl flew away. We retrieved the vole and threw it into the trees, 15 feet in front of us. The string dropped over a spruce bough so that the vole was dangling in mid-air. Upon jerking the string, the owl swooped down to a branch a foot away and jumped onto the vole. After 30 seconds, it released the vole and flew 10 yards to a dead tree stump 12 feet off the ground. Again the vole was retrieved and thrown into the trees 10 yards in front of us. The owl swooped down without flapping its wings and landed a foot from the vole which was resting on a branch beneath a dense spruce bough. The owl walked about on the bough, tipping its head 90° to each side and looking at the vole; it then reached through the dense spruce bough and picked the vole up in its claws. After 30 seconds, the owl released it and flew to its perch.

Next we untied the vole and threw it into the woods about 20 yards from the owl. It at once swooped down in its characteristic dive, seized the vole in

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its claws, picked it up in its beak, flew to its perch, and began to pick and pull at the vole's head, holding the body on the stump with one foot. For the first 3 minutes the owl constantly surveyed its surroundings and picked at the vole with a meagre effort. After a Black-billed Magpie landed nearby, the Hawk Owl made no attempt to eat its prey but watched the magpie closely. The moment the magpie flew away the owl began tearing the head off the vole, devouring it whole. The remainder of the vole was devoured in smaller pieces — fur, flesh and viscera.

The tameness and curiosity of the Hawk Owl was evident, as mentioned by E. T. Seton in 1890.<sup>1</sup> It appeared to locate the vole mostly by sight as it was upwind prior to all attacks. The owl was interested in the vole mainly when it was moving. This same observation has been made on Great Gray Owls.<sup>2</sup>

The Hawk Owl we observed was south of its boreal breeding range in which it usually winters. However, on rare occasions shortages in food forces these birds south.<sup>1</sup> This individual was likely hungry, explaining its strong response to the lure. Smith had a nesting Hawk Owl take a dead "field mouse" off a stick.<sup>5</sup>

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Hawk Owl

Fred W. Lahrman

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Robert J. Long



<sup>1</sup>BENT, A. C. 1961. *Life history of North American birds of prey. Part two.* Dover Publications Inc., N.Y., N.Y. 482 pp.

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

<sup>3</sup>GODFREY, W. E. 1966. *The birds of Canada.* Nat. Mus. of Canada. Bull. No. 203, Ottawa, 428 pp.

<sup>4</sup>SALT, W. R. 1972. *The birds of Alberta.* Queen's Printer, Gov't. of Alberta. Edmonton, Alberta. 511 pp.

<sup>5</sup>SMITH, N. F. 1922. *The American Hawk Owl.* Can. Field-Nat. 36: 68-71.