

GREAT GRAY OWL ATTACKS CAGED PHEASANTS

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On 17 April 1982, I received a local phone call from Robert A. Clark who lives near the shore of Longbow Lake, 12 miles east of Kenora, Ontario. Bob is a conductor for Canadian Pacific Railways and an enthusiastic naturalist who keeps a few exotic birds (pheasants, turkeys, peafowl) in pens on his lakeshore property. He told me about an incident that I think is worth recording.

On the evening of 25 March 1982, Bob was at the edge of Longbow Lake when he heard a strange noise coming from the direction of his bird pens. This was about 1800 h and it was still fairly light. He hastened up the hill to his pens, about 200 feet away, and was surprised to find a large dark gray owl perched on a stump near a pen that contained three Golden Pheasants. He looked closely at the owl, expecting to see the ear tufts of a Great Horned Owl but to his surprise the bird completely lacked ear tufts. It then dawned on him that it must be a Great Gray Owl. Meanwhile, the owl moved to a fence post about 15 feet away from him, glaring steadily at him with bright yellow eyes. Bob noted that the owl had a big, round head. Later, he examined his own mounted specimens of a Great Horned Owl and a Great Gray Owl (mounting and possession of protected raptors found dead is permitted in Ontario) as well as photos in his copy of *Great Gray Owl — Phantom of the Northern Forest* and concluded that the bird was a Great Gray Owl.¹

It flew away shortly after he had studied it, but by a curious coincidence it was seen a minute or so later flying

over a bay of the lake by Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources employee Bill Mills. Mills told Clark two days later about seeing a Great Gray Owl (and a single Canada Goose) fly by him at evening on the day of Clark's observation. Thus, it seems well established that Bob Clark's owl was a Great Gray Owl.

Examination of the pen revealed the presence of numerous wing and talon marks in the snow along the side of the pheasant pen which was covered on that side with one-inch chicken wire. One of the three Golden Pheasants was dead, evidently having killed itself trying to escape. A second bird had managed to smash out of the pen, but was later recaptured. The third one was free of harm.

Clark guessed that the strange noise he had heard from the lakeshore for several minutes was the sound of the owl buffeting and whacking the wire screen on the side of the pen with its wings and body, trying to get at the helpless pheasants. He also guessed that the owl had been repeatedly launching itself from its perch on the nearby stump, apparently oblivious to the wire. Clark guessed that if the pen had been covered with two-inch chicken wire the owl might have broken his way into the pen.

He admitted that there was no cover in the pen for the pheasants to hide behind (he has since added spruce boughs for cover). It is nice to know that he bears no animosity towards the owl and even assumed that it might return. After discussing the affair with friends, it

was guessed that it must have been a hungry owl. Someone mentioned the heavy crust of snow, more than one inch and sufficient to support a man at that time, and the likelihood that the owl had been unable to find its usual prey of small mammals. Clark felt strongly that the owl was driven by hunger to try to attack the pheasants.

Great Gray Owls have only rarely been known to tackle such large prey, though a Golden Pheasant is close to the body size of a Ruffed Grouse. In my experience Great Gray Owls have once only killed Ruffed Grouse, Spruce Grouse, and Sharp-tailed Grouse. The book *The Birds of Minnesota* makes

note of the fact that a Great Gray Owl entered a henhouse one December and killed two fowl.²

Clearly, the Great Gray Owl is capable of fierce action when hungry and one needs to keep an open mind about their capacity for occasionally attacking fowl, although mainly preying on small mammals.

¹NERO, R. W. 1980. Great Gray Owl — Phantom of the northern forest. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.

²ROBERTS, T. S. 1932. The Birds of Minnesota. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

TWENTY-SECOND ANNUAL NESTBOX REPORT FROM BRANDON, MANITOBA

MRS. JOHN LANE, 1701 Lorne Avenue, Brandon, Manitoba, R7A 0W2 and MAMIE McCOWAN, BARBARA ROBINSON, HAZEL PATMORE and ANN SMITH.

In 1982 the nestbox project was carried out for its twenty-second year by the volunteer group "The Friends of the Bluebirds". These volunteers held spring and fall meetings and monitored boxes during the spring-to-fall period. Their field notes were submitted to the project co-ordinator, Mrs. John Lane. Data from these notes have been used in the preparation of this report.

A summary of nestbox occupants in 1982, is given in Table 1. Other creatures occupying boxes included mice, squirrels, and an Eastern Kingbird.

We noted a substantial increase in nestings of Eastern Bluebirds from 43 nestings in 1981 to 72 this year.

One cross breeding was reported by Earle Farley of Douglas, an Eastern ♀ x Mountain♂.

Earle also reported a magnificent flock of Mountain Bluebirds in fall migration. We quote from his observations: "On September 15, I was sowing fall rye in our pasture field. As I came to a corner I could see a large flock of Mountain Bluebirds, approximately 100 in number. They were feeding in the short grass and some on the fence — a wonderful sight. The next day when I drove up to the tractor and drill, I could see the bluebirds sitting on the tractor and drill and in the small trees nearby. They all moved to the trees as I came close. They stayed in the area most of that day."

A pair of Eastern Kingbirds nested in one of Earle Farley's boxes and three eggs were laid but they did not hatch. The entrance hole was large, the work of a squirrel that previously had occupied the box.