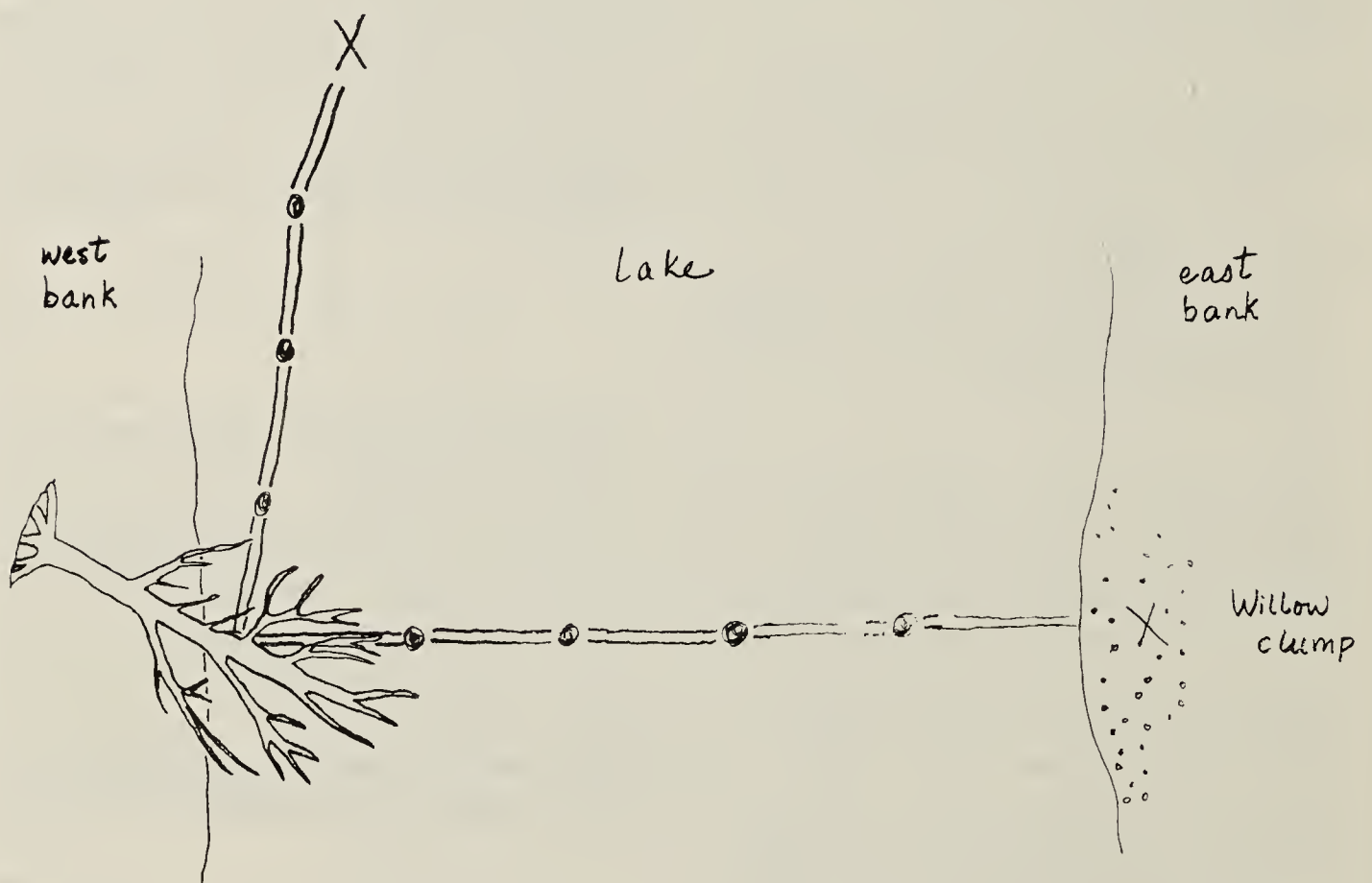


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# JUNIOR NATURALISTS

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## MYSTERY IN THE SNOW



The wildlife drama slowly unfolded as I collected more clues. A meeting had taken place between a predator and its prey. Here are the clues in the order that I found them on that cold January day in southern Manitoba.

Clue 1: Two straight furrows, resembling cross-country ski tracks, extended from one side of the snow-covered lake to the other, a distance of 75 m (fig. 1). Skis carve deep ruts in freshly fallen snow but these tracks were no

more than 1.5 cm deep. Other findings helped to disprove the ski theory. There were no pole marks and the parallel lines were interrupted every 10 or 15 m by shallow, nearly round depressions.

Clue 2: The furrows led to an uprooted poplar on the west bank. The animal rested here before turning north. Clumps of fur and bird droppings littered the trampled snow beneath the fallen tree.

Clue 3: The trail ran along the west bank for 50 m then came to an abrupt end. Part of a dead hare lay in the track.

Clue 4: Backtracking to the east bank, I found that the tracks originated in a stand of willows, where a second piece of a hare carcass was discovered.

Clue 5: There was only one Snowshoe Hare involved. The head, front legs and viscera remained on the east bank; the rest of the hare lay out on the lake.

Clue 6: Feather impressions were clearly outlined in the snow surrounding the front portion of the body. The feather marks belonged to a large bird, about the size of an owl.

With this last piece of information, the mystery was solved. The hare had been a victim of an owl attack.

The predator had fled from the kill site with only part of the prey in its grasp. The carcass was heavy enough to prevent the owl flying off with it; but the owl was able to lift it high enough to drag it across the lake. The two furrows were made as the hare's legs dragged behind in the snow. Circular, shallow depressions marked the spots where the owl had stopped to rest. Judging by the number of stops, the owl was having trouble carrying the heavy load.

The owl was feeding under the uprooted tree when I came along. A second attempt was made to flee with the fresh kill, but the owl finally gave up and abandoned the hare.

Why did the owl fly to the other side of the lake? A little bit of guess work is needed here. A coyote had been heard in the area earlier in the day. The owl may have had a bad experience with a

coyote, losing its food to the canine scavenger. Not to be cheated out of a meal again, the owl fled to the west bank.

When I reached the northern shoreline, I glanced back in the direction from which I had come. A Great-horned Owl was flying low over the lake. The next morning, when I returned to the spot where the owl had abandoned the hare, the carcass was no longer there but a 10 cm owl pellet was in its place.—

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*Snowshoe Hare are an important source of food for Great Horned Owls*

*Photo by Hans Dommasch*