

## MAGPIES AND AN OWL

On 21 December 1996 we discovered a Great Gray Owl a few kilometres north of Saskatoon. This bird stayed in the same locality until at least 15 January 1997, so I was able to see the bird on several occasions. It frequented the north side of Lutheran Road between the Loraas Landfill and a commercial development. A riding school, surrounded by rough vegetation and low bushes, occupied the centre of this area. The nearby dump held a large population of Black-billed Magpies, which used a small bluff in the northwest corner of the owl's territory as a roost site. Frequently, the owl was attended by two silent magpies as the owl hunted or perched. When the owl flew they followed it, when it perched, they perched nearby and waited quietly. Generally they sat on either side and lightly above the head of the owl, about one metre away. Each time the owl flew, the magpies would follow. When the owl was sitting, it swung its head back and forth listening for prey. The magpies did not appear to pay much attention, but immediately followed it when it flew. This was very different behaviour from that I have noted with other corvids and owls. In eastern Canada, American Crows and Blue Jays will go into a screaming frenzy over Barred or Great Horned Owls. I have also seen many Great Grays in the east, well out of the magpies' range, so I could not observe the interaction of these species before. On reflection though, I do not recall any of the eastern Great Grays being mobbed by any bird, although other observers report such harassment. Does this mean that magpies know that the Great Gray is not a threat? I have only seen these owls catch "mice" and any pellet I have examined contained only small rodent

bones. The scientific literature records that the diet is around 90% small rodents. So what were the magpies doing? Were they waiting for the owl to flush something for them or hoping to steal the big bird's catch?

- ROY JOHN, 754 Woodpark Road S.W., Calgary, AB T2W 2S4

### Editor's Note

A recent article in the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds magazine *Birds* examined the influence of Sparrowhawks on small bird populations. The Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) is the ecological equivalent — similar in colour, size and habits — to our Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*). The authors, Professors Ian Newton and Chris Perrins, reviewed data collected for two song bird studies. One has been run since 1947 and looked at two types of European chickadee, Blue Tit and Great Tit. The other ran from 1949 to 1979 and studied all the local woodland song birds, 13 species in all. During these studies there was a period, from 1960 to 1972, when the Sparrowhawk all but died out. A conservation effort has resulted in the recovery of the hawk to something like its former levels. The authors were able to compare the periods when the Sparrowhawk was present, absent and present again on consistent population data of its prey species. The plots of population of each of the species with time shows some increased, some decreased, but most stayed the same. A few changes could be related to factors like weather, but most matched the changes in farming practices. None of the variations in population level could be correlated with the presence of the hawk.