

EPISODE OF GREAT GRAY OWLS MATING APRIL 18, 1996, 6:47 P.M. Highway #211.

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My first sighting of a Great Gray Owl was December 29, 1995 on highway #11 near Lac Du Bonnet, Manitoba. I experienced scattered sightings throughout January and February of 1996. March brought a veritable cornucopia of owls. I had never seen so many, in fact. the past two winters of daily travelling between Pinawa and Rennie in the Whiteshell Provincial Park, I'd never seen one.

Almost daily contact with Dr. Jim Duncan at the Manitoba Conservation Centre convinced me to drag my husband out to do the Manitoba annual owl survey in April 1996. We did the owl survey on a small stretch of highway (#211) between Hwy #11 and Pinawa. The survey was done on the evenings of April 7th and April 10th.

We started the owl calls along the lonely stretch of highway about 8:00 p.m.. Before long we encountered and unexpected surprise. We were at first dismayed and then amused, flashing lights tend to do this to law abiding citizens, because there was more interest in our dawdling along the highway by the local constabulary and town folk than the intended targets. You could tell by their facial expressions that the local R.C.M.P. patrols usually did not encounter this type of strange behaviour from the town residents. We had only one sighting and one call during our forays into the cold spring nights.

On April 18, 1996, we were finally experiencing a break from the winter

weather. At 6:30 pm the skies were clear and slightly tinted with pink, as the sun slowly dropped over the edge of the horizon. It was a gorgeous evening but I unfortunately was trapped inside my vehicle hurtling its way down highway #211 from Pinawa to a meeting in Lac Du Bonnet. Overhead a flock of pelicans, flashing white against the blue sky, were sailing their way toward open water on the Winnipeg River near Lac Du Bonnet. My first sighting of this species that season.

Whoa! What's that up ahead? Could it be... yes, a Great Gray Owl sitting in a poplar tree on the south side of the highway. What incredible luck! Now there I sat, 6:47 p.m. with a big grin on my face watching an apparently unconcerned Great Gray sitting on a large balsam poplar limb.

Emboldened by our earlier night survey experience I rolled down the car window and did a few hoo's. The owl returned small sounds while watching me in the car. Suddenly, out of nowhere, another owl swooped in low and presented the first owl with a large vole, and immediately flew away. The female owl initially took the vole in her beak (the male owl gives food gifts to females), but had to grasp the vole with her right foot to reposition it so as to swallow it head first. Afterwards, the female plummeted to the ground, crashing through the snow in the ditch. With a puzzled look, if you can call it that, and much turning of her head she realized she had missed her prey. She then tried

once more by jumping up approximately one half of a meter to the left and behind the original spot and missed again. Here she remained, listening for movement under the snow.

About thirty seconds later the male owl swooped down at an alarming speed with his legs and talons extended. It appeared as if he also was going to try for the unfortunate prey under the snow but to my surprise with talons extended he clasped the female's back from behind.

His ladylove was very nonchalant, pretending HE wasn't there by still observing and listening to the activity under the snow. From the back he moved slightly sideways to get closer. Only then did she finally enter into the spirit of this encounter by flattening down, and moving her fanned tail up and to the left, at which time he moved his tail away and fanned it to the right. Then they "touch" in the cloaca area. During the time of this encounter there was an

absence of vocalization. I dared not blink my eyes because as soon as the "touch" was completed the male flew away as swiftly and as silently as his first approach. The mating process took all of a few seconds to occur.

To illustrate how vulnerable owls are, the male owl flew north directly across the road at the level of my car hood. Great Gray Owls are often victims of car and train collisions. Once again I gave a few more low hooos; the territory call of the Great Gray Owl. The male stared back at me, with a disdainful look and then flew to the northeast into a tamarack stand. meanwhile, the female continued to vocalize, while perched in a tree. She then continued to hunt, gliding silently over the snow covered ditch.

Casting a farewell glance to the owl, I slowly drove toward the sinking sun with one of the most unique experiences, I'll ever have, firmly entrenched in my mind.



Estimates of the peak population of birds for the summer in North America range from 5 to 20 billion.

The total population of Franklin's Gull is estimated to be 700,000 birds.