A LONG-EARED OWL'S NEST

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While perusing Robert Symons's *Hours and the Birds*[1], my attention was drawn — amid an array of sketches and watercolours of prairie birds — to a sketch of a Long-eared Owl *(Asio otus)* defending its nest and eggs at Eight Mile Lake near Battleford, Saskatchewan, on 15 May 1932 (Figure 1). I saw this sketch many years ago but forgot about it until recently when I searched for early records of cowbird parasitism on the Canadian Prairies. This sketch reminded me of a Long-eared Owl's nest I discovered just south of the Battle River and Battleford (N52.709851°, W108.324344°), on 26 April 1959. That day is vivid in my memory as this was the first Long-eared Owl's nest I observed and the first of five nests of this species located that year.

As I rounded a clump of willows in an aspen bluff, I came face to face with the female owl as it incubated its clutch of five eggs in an old crow's nest. The startled bird soon assumed an aggressive posture in defense of the eggs, as shown in the photograph taken a few days later (Figure 2). The nest was about 3 m from the ground, and was reminiscent of the nest Symons described more than 25 years earlier, which was less than 20 km to the northwest. It was the only Long-eared Owl nest I was able to observe through fledging in 1959 (PNRS card # db19915; Figure 3). This nest and three others contained clutches of five eggs, whereas the fifth nest contained six eggs.

Finding Long-eared Owl nests with little effort in 1959 prompted me to plan to study this species' nesting biology in the following years. The study did not proceed, however, because I found only three Long-eared Owl's nests in 1960, and none were found during the next two years, despite a concerted effort to inspect as many old crow and magpie nests as possible. I moved away from Battleford in 1962. I learned later that breeding Long-eared Owls respond to ups and downs of the numbers of their prey, especially small mammals such as voles.[2] By tracking their prey across the landscape, the owls may settle and nest where adequate prey is encountered. If the abundance of prey has declined by the following year, the birds may settle elsewhere, or forego nesting that year.[2] Was this the situation in the Battleford area in the early 1960s, or did this reflect regional differences in abundance?

Long-eared Owls were locally common in south-central Saskatchewan in 1960, according to the number of nests discovered and young banded between 1946 and 1960. From 1946 to 1958, 10 young were banded at two nests (one nest in 1952, one in 1958), whereas in 1959 and 1960, 12 and 73 young were banded at four and 18 nests, respectively. No nests were recorded from 1961 to 1963.[3] Long-eared Owls that nested in the Battleford area in 1959 and 1960 apparently were part of a broader nesting by this species in south-central Saskatchewan in those years. Anecdotal observations suggested that voles were particularly abundant in those years[3,4],

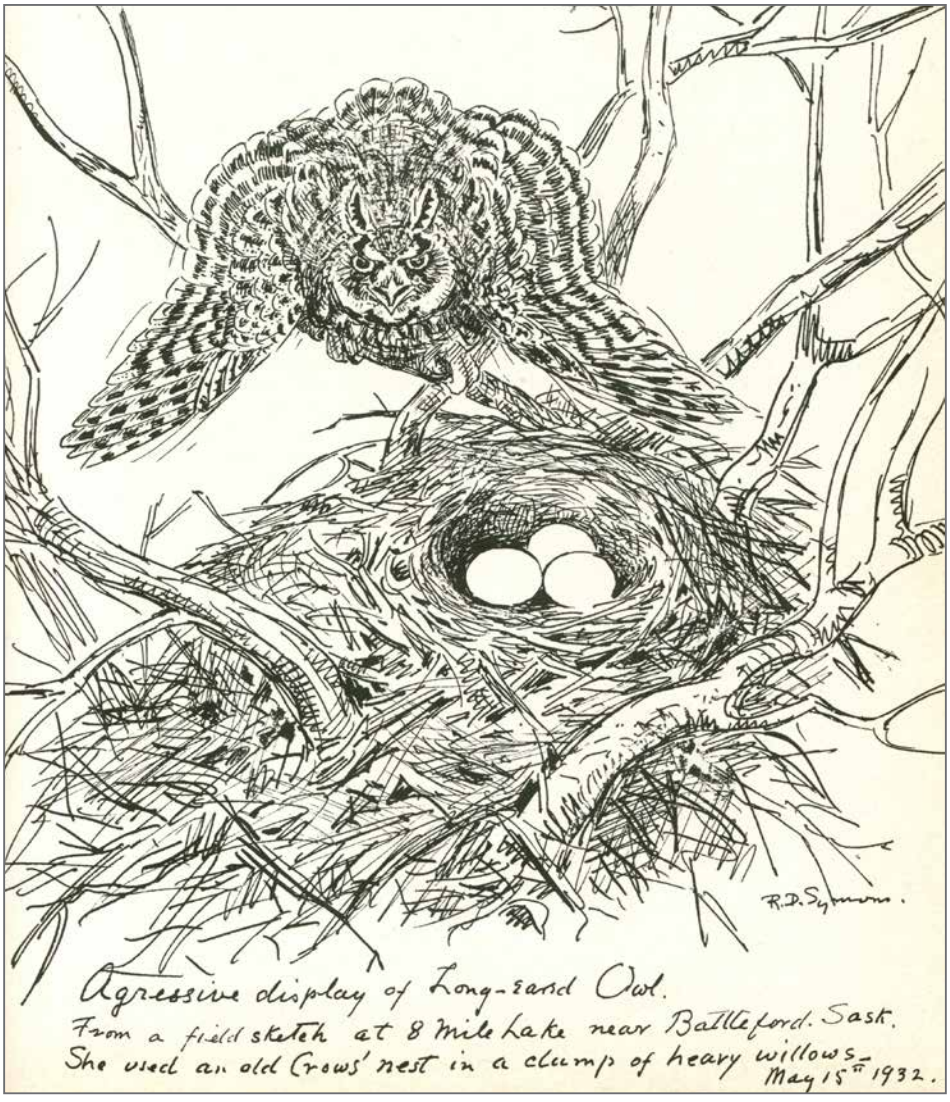

FIGURE 1. Robert Symons's sketch of a Long-eared Owl in *Hours and the Birds* (1967, p. 137), depicting the female owl in a defensive posture near its eggs at Eight Mile Lake near Battleford, Saskatchewan, 15 May 1932. Reprinted with permission of the publisher, the University of Toronto Press.

FIGURE 2. Long-eared Owl defending its nest, 9 May 1959, south of the Battle River and Battleford, Saskatchewan. Photo credit: S.G. Sealy.

FIGURE 3. Long-eared Owl's nest with eggs (28 April 1959) and fledgling, or 'brancher' (3 June 1959). Photo credits: S.G. Sealy.

FIGURE 4. Long-eared Owl reacting aggressively, with right wing extended, 28 April 1959. Photo credit: S.G. Sealy.

but because their numbers were not monitored anywhere in Saskatchewan during that time, a possible link cannot be made between numbers of breeding Long-eared Owls and densities of the prey.

High vole numbers in 1960 were also suggested by widespread nesting of Short-eared Owls *(A. flammeus)* and Northern Harriers *(Cirus cynaeus)* in south-central Saskatchewan.[3,5] The only Short-eared Owl nest I discovered near Battleford in any year was one that contained two eggs, on 28 May 1960, but it had been depredated by 30 May. The 21 harrier nests recorded while searching for Long-eared Owl nests formed the basis of a study of this species' nesting biology.[6] Another apparent response to vole abundance was the much-publicized influx of the Boreal Owl *(Aegolius funereus)* into south-central Saskatchewan in winter 1960.[7] In this case, the response was apparently to a decline in the food supply in the northern forests, which forced the owls to search for areas where voles were more abundant.[5,7]

A naturalist's naturalist

Symons's many and varied interests and accomplishments[8] — rancher, homesteader, wheat farmer, game warden, writer, storyteller, artist, birdwatcher, teacher, and conservationist — were highlighted in a memoriam published shortly after his death in 1973.[9] Symons's last book, *Hours and the Birds*, is a treasure trove of experiences and observations that stretched from his early life in England, to a ranch in the interior of British Columbia, to the Cypress Hills, and to his final home near Last Mountain Lake on the Saskatchewan prairies.[9]

Amid those travels, Symons spent several years in the Battleford area while serving as a field officer of the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources in the early 1930s.[9,10] His observations and impressions of the area were the impetus for the 1935 Museum field expedition to the area and for the site chosen for the Saskatchewan Natural History Society's summer meeting in 1972.[11] During this time, Symons discovered the Long-eared Owl nest northwest of Battleford at which he sketched the female's aggressive defense of her eggs. He devoted several sentences to the Long-eared Owl, in which he compared its plumage with other owls, and depicted its aggressive posture with both wings outstretched "fan-wise" (p. 136), facing the intruder — a posture similar to that of the female Long-eared Owl photographed at the Battleford nest (Figure 4):

> A more southern owl of the woodlands is the LONG-EARED OWL, a lover of the parklands and particularly of the willow thickets where the trees are old and lichened and there is much tangled deadwood. In such a thicket in the Devil's Coulee near Renown I found a nest in 1924. The brooding bird fluffed like a barnyard hen, snapping her bill rapidly and spreading her wings fan-wise in the likeness of a sun-bittern — a bird you will not see in Canada. The head ornaments of the long-eared owl are more akin to ears than those of the horned owl, whereas the SHORT-EARED OWL has mere apologies, no better than a gopher's.

Acknowledgements

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2. Duncan JR (2003) Owls of the world. Key Porter Books, Toronto, ON.

3. Houston CS (1997) Banding of *Asio* owls in south-central Saskatchewan. Pages 237-242 *in* Biology and conservation of owls of the Northern Hemisphere (Duncan JR, Johnson DH, Nicholls TH, editors). *General Technical Report NC-190, USDA Forest Service*, St. Paul, MN.

4. Stoffel MJ (2019) Long-eared Owl. Pages 355-357 *in* Birds of Saskatchewan (Smith AR, Houston CS, Roy JF, editors). Nature Saskatchewan, Regina, SK.

5. Houston C[S] (1960) 1960 – The year of the owls. *Blue Jay* 18:110.

6. Sealy SG (1967) Notes on the breeding biology of the Marsh Hawk in Alberta and Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 25:63-69.

7. Anweiler G (1960) The Boreal Owl influx. *Blue Jay* 18:61-63.

8. Wagner J (1970) Robert D. Symons, naturalist, writer, artist. *Blue Jay* 28:148-149.

9. Ledingham GF (1973) In Memoriam: Robert David Symons, 1899–1973. *Blue Jay* 31:131-134.

10. Belcher M (1972) An early provincial museum field camp in the Battleford area. *Blue Jay* 30:8-17.

11. Dunk F (1936) Report of Director, Provincial Museum, Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources, for year ending April 30, 1935. Regina, SK.