



GREAT GRAY OWL

A Visual Natural History PAUL BANNICK



Male Great Gray Owls do the majority of the hunting for the family. They usually consume smaller prey such as this recently captured shrew and bring larger prey such as voles and gophers back to their mate and young.

THE GREAT GRAY GHOST

The dark shape took form as it drifted silently from a tangle of aspens. I had come to Minnesota to find the Great Gray Owl but had not imagined such a large bird could fly so slowly without falling to the ground. As it floated toward me at eye level—a stern countenance on still, horizontal wings—I could not help but focus on its golden eyes. They were bright and piercing, as if lit by fire, striking in their stark contrast to the otherwise soft roundness of the immense face, which obscured the rest of the owl's body. Those blazing eyes glowed as if they were the engine of an otherwise passive gliding ghost.

I scanned the snow-covered meadow, searching for the owl's prey, but saw nothing. Suddenly the owl slammed violently into the snow, seemingly face-first, directly in front of me and looked for a moment like a disheveled, lifeless pile of gray, brown, and white feathers. Slowly the owl shape reassembled. Looking stunned, with its snow-covered face peering downward, the owl sank, until only its head and shoulders were visible above the white blanket. Its talons and feet dug deep and emerged with a large vole, which the bird consumed with a few open-billed jerks of the head. Before I could contemplate what had happened, the owl took flight in a spray of snow, dissolving back into the dense cluster of gray-and-white aspens and leaving only an imprint of clenched feet, wings, and feathers in a depression in the snow.

Plunging my boots into the two-foot-deep drifts, I headed toward what I imagined would be a window in the aspens large enough to accommodate the huge owl's nearly five-foot wingspan. I was dismayed to find no such opening but instead a continuous web of branches and trunks. I traced the edge of the woods, guessing that the owl would be back to hunt soon, but had no luck.

Only hours later, when I reversed course and had the light at my back, was I able to discern—barely—the outline of the Great Gray's oversized head, round in the



RIGHT: *A Canada Jay attacks a calling Great Gray Owl. Owls occasionally feed upon birds and their young, so many bird species instinctively attack to drive them away and to teach inexperienced birds of the danger.*

OPPOSITE, LEFT: *A Boreal Owl with a recently captured shrew in his bill looks toward his nest and the waiting young. Boreal Owls are found in dense stands of spruce within Great Gray Owl habitat in the boreal forest, but in the western United States they are typically found at higher elevations than Great Grays.*

OPPOSITE, RIGHT: *Grizzly bears are native to many of the same mature forests and open meadows preferred by Great Gray Owls across the northern and western part of their range. Grizzlies were extirpated throughout much of the southern part of their range but remain in parts of Alaska, Canada, and some northern states and may be reintroduced to others.*





PHYSICAL FEATURES

The Great Gray Owl is a large owl with a distinctive round facial disk featuring subtle fine barring in several concentric circles of gray and brown on a white background. On its neck, just below the yellow or, rarely, ivory-colored bill, is a small black patch bordered by two elongated white patches, which form what is often called a “bow tie.” The gray “eyebrows” give the impression of a surprised face. While its eyes are relatively small, the owl’s eyesight is keen and, along with its exceptional hearing, makes it a successful hunter. The Great Gray appears gray from a distance, but its coloration includes a significant amount of brown or grayish brown, particularly on the tail and wing feathers, which tend to become browner with age. This coloration provides camouflage across a wide range of forest types, whether the dominant trees are fir, spruce, cottonwood, aspen, or pine. Male and female Great Gray Owls look very much alike except that females are on average 30 to 40 percent heavier than males.

The Great Gray is often described as an “earless owl” since it lacks distinctive ear tufts like those of the Great Horned Owl, but as with other owls, the true ears are feather-covered openings on either side of the skull. The Great Gray Owl’s ears are asymmetrical in both size and position on the skull, with the left ear tilted upward more than the right, enabling the owl to better pinpoint the location of prey in three dimensions.

The peculiar shape of the Great Gray gives it the appearance of a flying log. The legs are long but are often hidden by feathers when in flight or perched, and the distinctive foot-long tail is broad and wedge-shaped. In flight, from the side, the head appears oversized, and the body tapers from the broad head to the thinner torso and long tail.

The impressive ability of this large-framed owl to appear or vanish in the time it takes to turn your head or even blink is one reason I prefer to call it the Great

Remarkable camouflage hides the Great Gray Owl from our view, even when it is flying. This combined with its secretive nature, preference for hours of low light, and ability to compress its wings and feathers to fit through small forest openings, make the Great Gray difficult to find and earns it such nicknames as “Phantom of the North.”



LEFT: *Large, well-decayed, broken-topped snags of forty feet or taller are more common in the western United States than elsewhere in the Great Gray Owl's range.*

OPPOSITE: *When nestlings are small, the female tears prey into smaller pieces, but as they near fledging, they are left with whole voles or gophers like the one in this nestling's bill.*





LEFT: A couple of months after leaving the nest, juveniles are scruffier and thinner-looking versions of the adults with less defined white markings.

RIGHT: A juvenile Great Gray Owl anticipates the arrival of its father with prey as a sunset is colored by a distant forest fire. The warming climate and the associated fires are altering forests across the Great Gray Owl's range.



Using a large boulder as a hunting perch, a juvenile hunts for grasshoppers and voles in the surrounding ranchland. Ranches, agricultural areas, and public lands play an important role in the survival of Great Gray Owls in the southern and western part of their range in particular.



A Great Gray Owl flies from a riverbank after a failed attempt at capturing a vole. Voles do well in grassy or herbaceous areas that are moist and open, making the treeless edges of ponds, lakes, or slow-moving rivers productive hunting sites.

Taking Action

When I hear a Great Gray's steady, pulsing call, I feel as if I am listening to the very heartbeat of the boreal forest. When one emerges ghost-like from the trees or its movements break its camouflage against bark, revealing its startling countenance, I am entranced, and I think this is true for many who see these owls in captivity, in the wild, or in strong photographic images. I believe our enchantment with these owls can motivate us to learn more about them, help preserve their habitats, and act mindfully in their presence.

Whenever we encounter Great Gray Owls, it is important to remember that they are wild animals, and although they may not seem to mind our presence, they are, at best, tolerant of us. Avoid getting too close, making them fly, or attempting to get them to come into view through recordings or food. Playing their calls can interfere with their ability to establish a territory, find food and mates, and breed successfully. Feeding or baiting owls can alter their behavior, causing them to spend time too close to human habitations and roads, where there is a greater chance of them being accidentally hit by vehicles.

If you are fortunate enough to live in Great Gray Owl habitat, you can help the owls by putting up a nesting platform. Artificial platforms are often used by owls for many years. You can find plans for a Great Gray Owl platform at www.nestwatch.org.

Landowners with Great Gray Owls nesting on their property must be cautious when thinning or cutting. Leave a larger uncut buffer around nest sites and retain leaning trees. Keep the overall size of cuts small, retain hunting perches in cut areas, and maintain an irregular boundary for the cut. Take care to maintain the canopy.

Most Great Gray Owls live out of our sight on US public lands, Canadian Crown lands, and commercial forestlands, and we generally encounter the owls only when they move outside those habitats. Even though we don't often see them, we should keep them in mind; they rely on us to become educated about their needs and to act to protect both them and their ecosystem. We must advocate for the owls' needs to be considered before forests are cut or thinned or meadows developed within