

Subject: QUIET RESIDENT at ORDWAY (III)

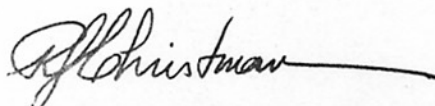
It was a deep winter's night and late January; it was new moon and no light; the wind had dropped and calm air prevailed. I was awakened by what seemed to be voices and for a moment lay listening until I realized the voices were not saying anything intelligible (they could have been human at that). I arose and listened more intently through the opened window. The monologue consisted of some soft whispering and whistling sounds and did indeed sound like the muffled sound of humans talking in an adjacent room.

It was a Long-eared Owl (Asio otus) and it had flown into a coppice near the building where it was now perched in an elm tree. In the beam of a flashlight I was able to make out a huddled form with shining alert eyes but he remained in place despite the luminal intrusion into his dark privacy. When daylight came he was gone. I had suspected his presence at Ordway for a number of months and once, deep in the oak woods, a silent, slow-flapping form flew ahead of me from high in the trees but allowed no positive identification in its secretive dusk-flight.

The Owls are constantly about but one does not often see them. There is evidence enough of their presence: The occasional remains of a dead Crow, efficiently picked clean save for its giveaway black feathers; one sometimes hears, too, the agitated daylight gatherings of screaming Crows as they band together to pester some hapless Owl in retaliation for his nocturnal raids upon them. Another giveaway to the Owls' presence is the result of their peculiar digestive system, which rejects the indigestible parts of their intake, forming ball-shaped masses which the bird regurgitates once or twice a week. These "owl pellets" at the base of a perching-tree are indicators of the presence of these silent nocturnal forest birds and indeed are interesting studies in themselves for they reveal much about the eating habits of these birds. The skulls and thigh bones of small birds and mammals plus bits of fur and feathers constitute the bulk of these pellets and there have been instances when small aluminum bird-bands have been recovered from such droppings.

At Ordway the most interesting and majestic of this group of birds is the Great Horned Owl (Bubo virginianus), larger than most of them and a long-ranging hunter who stays the winter through and whose "hoots" are louder and more easily recognized than the call of the Long-eared Owl. One drizzly week in October one of these magnificent birds showed up on a fallen tree not far from the building, obviously injured but still alert and fierce. I was unable to determine any wounds and now presume that the bird was the victim of a severe sprain or bruise, perhaps as a result of having flown into a wire or other flight obstacle; after almost a week, during which he stayed close although fluttering away from my attempts to hand-feed him, one morning he had disappeared and I believe he had recovered sufficiently to get himself air-borne and fly into the woods where he would have greater protection and security - and privacy.

The activities of the Owls at Ordway remain relatively a secret, one main reason being that they are nocturnal and I am not.



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