

Great Horned Owl by Alison Webber

NOCTURNAL BIRDING

By Neal C. Clark, Needham

While cautiously approaching an old Red Pine stand through the freezing cold, I heard a faint tinkling of dropping icicles in the still night air. Just as I looked toward the sound, a large, dark bird lumbered up and away into the full moonlight and then back into the shelter of the conifers. I was instantly warmed. On this local night hike I had been thinking of owls--especially the Great Horned--and this is what I think I saw in that all-too-brief sighting.

Birding after dark can be exhilarating. To some, it may seem an offbeat, even dangerous hobby, but let me explain how I became interested, and why "night prowling" - as the National Park Service terms its evening guided hikes - is so fascinating.

As one who has always been most energetic at night, I have naturally come to enjoy especially the bird sights and sounds of evening. Owls, with their unique hooting and caterwauling, have long been a favorite bird of prey, and, in order to study them, I have had to follow them during their awake hours: after dark in most cases. Aside from owls, any form of wildlife seen or heard at night is intriguing if not startling. In the darkness of a woodlot, marsh, or field, any sound can make me freeze, my heart racing and mouth dry. Perhaps I secretly want to be scared, or just to be totally alone with Nature for awhile. I do know that I feel compelled to search the deep dark woods, for birding nocturnally means entering a whole new world, and one does not explore one of those every day.

To brave this new world a few simple precautions are due. First, if you plan to enter public property, such as a park, refuge, or sanctuary, find out whether after-dark jaunts are allowed. Then, on your car windshield attach a note directed to the local police with your name, address, and purpose, and you probably will not get towed. Second, while a flashlight may be necessary, use one with a piece of transparent red plastic over the beam to avoid frightening the wildlife. In this way, you can still see, but won't be seen too easily. Third, wear warm, dark clothes in order to be comfortable and less conspicuous. Fourth, you might want to carry along a small (possibly collapsible) seat or stool to sit and remain quiet on. Last and most important, allow your eyes enough time - up to a half-hour - to become adjusted to the blackness. After the first few minutes, you will be able to see better than you had anticipated. You will easily be able to see where you are going, particularly if the immediate region is familiar. With or without moonlight, given enough time per trip, you will see and certainly hear many winged creatures at any time of year.

Late January is a prime time to start listening for that Great Horned Owl. Virtually no other bird is vocal at this time, so the low, loud hoots of five to seven syllables are unmistakable. This large nocturnal raptor, with its wingspan of almost five feet, is difficult to spot, particularly during its silent flight. However, just hearing the savage bird is a chilling thrill. While it is more common in rural areas, this

species of owl is holding its own in the suburbs. In civilized areas, its deep, warning-like calls can let you mentally migrate to the Great North Woods. To locate its breeding grounds, head for a good-sized pine stand near water with plenty of adjacent open space which could support rabbits and other small mammals. During the day scour the ground for its 2-4 inch regurgitated pellets found under its roost trees. At night, listen patiently - the sound you finally hear will be long-remembered.

February is a good month to begin listening for, and perhaps seeing, the Ruffed Grouse drumming. To attract a mate and to warn off potential rivals, the male beats its wings, displacing air and creating a muffled yet far-ranging drum roll that commences slowly and builds rapidly. This crescendo drumming, which may be heard during the day and twilight, is also given on moonlit nights. You can feel the sound waves surround you, but it is often difficult to detect the source, especially if there are numerous trees to deflect those waves. The common but wary grouse is found in fairly deep mixed woods or borders of woods, and in recently burnt-over areas. The bird relishes the buds of the indicative tree types, aspen and birch, in these new-growth areas. To hear the drumming is easy enough, but to view the male's strutting on a favorite log or rock is a sight well worth the time, effort, and patience required.

March offers several intriguing examples of avian showmanship. First, the most curious performance is that of the American Woodcock, or Timberdoodle. In early spring the male bird executes an aerial breeding ritual for his mate that has to be seen to be believed. At pre-dawn and dusk, and sometimes all night, he sounds a very nasal "peent" call several times, then rises and circles horizontally high in the sky. Then he zigzags downward, singing or chittering sharply, only to land in almost the exact take-off spot to resume his "peenting." The best time to see the night sprite is either at twilight or later with the aid of a full moon. This gamebird feeds mainly on earthworms, so if you go to suitable areas (wooded swamps, damp fields and woods, and golf courses) the bird should be found. I cannot think of a better natural nocturnal spectacle than this pudgy bird's matchless show.

Another curious bird, at least by its sound, is the vociferous Barred Owl. Both mates indulge at certain times in a comical duet comprised of squawks and hoots, plus the more usual eight hoots in two sets of four that sound similar to a barking dog in the distance. This owl is more inquisitive than others and will answer most attempts at imitation. If you know where Barred Owls are, it is a sure bet that you can call them out, proving that at least one species of owl does give a hoot for humans. This owl prefers swampy woodlands of mainly deciduous trees. You can listen to its oft-repeated hoots early in the evening and possibly call it in close enough to see. You won't hear it fly, but may hear its racket suddenly coming down on you when least expected.

A smaller owl, the Screech, is a strictly nocturnal raptor. It is difficult to spot during the day, as it often hides, sunning, just inside a choice tree. It is fairly vocal at night, though, giving both a whinny-like wail and a penetrating, ringing noise. The Screech Owl's haunts are cemeteries, meadows, old orchards, and farm woodlots - a suburban bird of prey. On a spring night hear its horse-like calls and picture an owl no

taller than a meadowlark.

April brings many new night-time sounds, along with its showers. Early in the month the American Bittern, or Stake-driver, is back, active before dawn and sometimes all through the night. It is found in cattail marshes, swamps, and grassy fields, where it devours frogs, fish, crayfish, and other animal matter. Unless it is flushed at your feet, it is hard to see, even during the day, due to its cryptic coloration; but its pumping noises can be heard from afar. This pumping is its breeding-season song. Since it sounds like a stake being driven into a bog, the primitive pumping is the sound of a cattail marsh before daybreak.

Later in April, a virtuoso songster (indeed, it has been dubbed the American Nightingale) has returned, singing by day and by moonlight. This is the retiring Hermit Thrush, whose clear piping and flute-like tremolo ring throughout its territory. Save for its beautiful song, this bird could be overlooked because of its shy behavior, drab color, and ground-feeding habits. To sight it, seek out coniferous or mixed woods, keeping in mind that it shuns human habitations. If you are in its habitat at night, listen carefully and let the music weave through the dense undergrowth to fill you with tranquillity.

By the end of the month the aggressive, jeering Gray Catbird starts to set up its territory for the breeding season by singing during the day and part of the night. The song is chock-full of short musical quips and harsher notes, all in one hurried garble. Add to this some mewling calls and you have an active member of the family of Mimic Thrushes. This bold songbird is familiar to many because of its preference for nesting close to civilization. It utilizes gardens, thickets, and residential areas along with the forest undergrowth.

Also at this time in April the Veery returns. At a moonlit dusk its mysterious, downward-spiralling song adds a slight touch of sadness to the advancing darkness. The bashful Veery prefers moist deciduous woodlands, and will often take to a small tree to sing or to keep a sharp look-out for intruders. This plain-looking thrush does not render a plain song, but rather one that is moving in an eerie way, particularly if you are not sure who the minstrel is.

Early May brings back the Whip-poor-will. When I hear its much-repeated song I know summer is practically here. The bird utters a cheerful, and never tiresome, vocalization. It may be seen flying erratically about, usually not too high, and since the flight is quiet, an observer has to be attentive to identify one at night. One must admire their persistence - it is a matter of record that one individual bird called its name over one thousand consecutive times at the rate of one per second! The Whip-poor-will is found living in dry open woods and even in residential areas, where it goes hawking for beetles, flying ants, moths, and other insects. On your summer night hikes, this bird will be a steady whistling companion all evening long.

At this time the Wood Thrush is back from wintering in Mexico or farther south, and what a master musician he is. I believe this bird has a clearer and more cheerful song than the Hermit Thrush. The song is rendered during the evening, echoing down from an elevated site, "EE-o-lay-

tee!" The Wood Thrush's sanctum is moist deciduous woods, parks, and gardens. It has adapted well to the environment of humans and is one of the least wary in the family.

About the middle of May the Common Nighthawk joins us, the male soon giving aerial displays for the female. He dives from a great height on stiff wings, making a booming sound before he veers up at the last minute. This relative of the Whip-poor-will is much more easily viewed and is often heard as well. Its call is a nasal "peent," though not as abrupt as that of the American Woodcock. The Nighthawk can be heard calling above plowed fields, open country, towns, and even above the sporadic roars at Fenway Park, Boston. These darters with the white wing patches are not solely nocturnal, often coursing about on cloudy afternoons. Watch closely for them, for occasionally they fly so low and are so attentive to their hawking that they can almost dust you off. I have ducked this bird.

Late in May and on through June and July, a few more species of songbirds remain active until nightfall and beyond: both species of cuckoos (the Black-billed and the Yellow-billed) and the Mockingbird. All three appear to favor the moonlight and perhaps save some energy by singing then instead of just during the heat of the summer day. The cuckoos are secretive and sedentary, while the mocker is full of life and may be seen springing up singing, and fluttering down again - a trim bundle of showmanship. It is the mocker's mouth (its scientific name, Mimus polyglottos, means literally "mimic of many tongues") that endears it to so many birders. The Mockingbird is a fine imitator of numerous other birds; the only difference is that after short phrases of imitation are repeated, another bird's phrase is tacked on. He seems to prefer variety and will show off even at night.

Look and listen for these three birds right next door. The mocker habituates cities, villages, gardens, parks, and open woods. If one is nearby, you will know it, for its singing can be grating at times. The two cuckoos are harder to spot, yet still at hand, gorging themselves on available caterpillars - much to the delight of farmers and gardeners. Overgrown pastures and orchards entice them to nest in vines fairly low yet well-concealed by surrounding leaves and branches.

From August through the rest of the year scan for the night migrants. Shorebirds, flycatchers, many species of sparrows, wood warblers, and thrushes are some of the many that regularly journey south through the night sky. One of the choicest autumnal sounds is a flock of Canada Geese on whistling wings honking towards the south. This may be in October or even after Thanksgiving; they follow an urge to depart to warmer climes and we stay behind, shovelling snow.

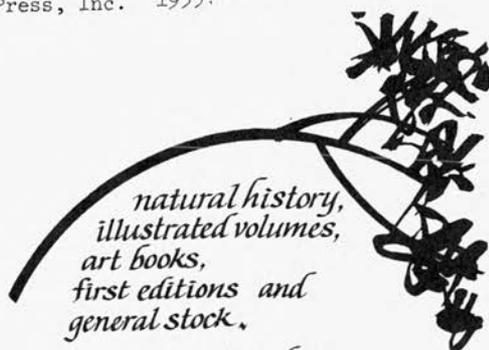
One unusual method of observation at this time is to point your binoculars or spotting scope at a full moon and watch different feathered forms cross in front of the bright light. I have tried it and seen a few small birds, but have also found that it can be a long and possibly chilly wait between sightings, and that it is difficult to positively identify anything. If you have the patience and the time on a fair evening, especially towards midnight, then try it once.

Night prowling, or to some, night owling, can be an adventure throughout the year. To start, you might do as the late Dr. Wyman Richardson suggested:

Come, some night in February, and stand for a while in the tall wood. There is no sound other than the rustle of a light breeze through a few tenacious oak leaves. Overhead a scattering of bright stars twinkles through the branches in a vain attempt to pierce the gloom of the forest. And then from a distance comes that vibrating, awe-inspiring call. Nearer and nearer it approaches, until at last it seems to fill all surrounding space. Soft, yet queerly penetrating, it reaches into your soul.

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