

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

Owl Voices.—The month of April, 1930, I spent at Monte Vista Ranch, which lies about fifteen miles east of San Diego, California. From the screened porch of the ranch house, where I slept, I was able, on many of the nights, to hear the voices of four kinds of owls, more than I had heretofore ever heard in a single location.

The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba pratincola*) was the first afield. Still plainly visible in the dusk and looking surprisingly large as it skimmed close over the roof, it would begin its hunt with a series of almost startling screams. The syllables *sreek, sreek, tsik, tsik, tsik, sikka, sikka*, convey some impression of the staccato cry, in which sibilant sounds predominated. These hissing squeals were characteristic of the early evening, though they might also be heard in the night. Surely the English are wise in giving to their Barn Owl the popular name of Screech Owl, as contrasted with the American owl which bears this misnomer.

How the word "screech" could ever have come to be applied to the pleasant, quavering notes of *Otus asio*, it is hard to comprehend. The Southern California Screech Owl (*Otus asio quercinus*) is not common near San Diego, and until my stay at Monte Vista Ranch I had never met with it. But a night sound I heard there was immediately recognized as the voice of this bird, through my long acquaintance with eastern screech owls. East and west the quality of the notes is the same, although those of the Southern California Screech Owl I heard were usually all in one pitch, not the descending scale characteristic of the eastern form. On only one occasion did I hear a lively variation in the range. Then there was evidently some excitement, and I suspected that two birds might be involved. At all other times the "song" consisted of five notes, the last three of which formed a tremolo—*hu, hu, hu-hu-hu*. Although giving the impression of a comparatively high register, I found, when I attempted to imitate the call, that the notes were almost the lowest sound I could make by whistling. Incidentally, long periods of "answering" by me failed to attract or seemingly to interest the owl.

The Screech Owl habitually called from the eastern part of the planted grove of trees surrounding the ranch house, while in the western part of the grove could be heard the quite different hoots of a Long-eared Owl (*Asio wilsonianus*). I confess that previously my only acquaintance with the Long-eared Owl's voice had been with the mewling sounds uttered when its nest is disturbed. My identification at Monte Vista Ranch was therefore based on elimination and likelihood. It was not the hooting of a Horned Owl, with which I am familiar; and the Long-eared Owl, I know, occurs in that general locality. The bird's call, as I heard it, consisted invariably of four notes of the same register—*who-hoo, hoo, hoo*. In tempo, if the last three notes were imagined to occupy three beats, the first occupied only one beat. The tone was delightfully smooth and mellow, almost suggesting the low notes of a flute. On one occasion the owl seemed to be standing in the tree directly beside my porch; and I turned on the light, hoping for a glimpse of the performer. I could see no bird, but the hooting continued at the same interval, regardless of the sudden flood of light.

Finally, there came from the more barren ground, beyond the cultivated acres which surround the ranch house, the high, clear, disyllabic call of the Burrowing Owl (*Speotyto cunicularia hypugaea*). Ralph Hoffmann has well rendered it as *pa-pá*. This sound, it seemed, as also the calls of the other owls, was more likely to be heard prior to midnight than after; but perhaps it was the condition of the observer that was chiefly responsible!

The Barn Owl's and Burrowing Owl's voices were heard throughout April, but the notes of the Screech Owl and the Long-eared Owl ceased some time during that month. I have no record of just when they stopped; I simply became aware, toward the end of the month, that I was no longer hearing them. Possibly the demands of young that had hatched left no time for further "singing."—CLINTON G. ABBOTT, *San Diego Society of Natural History, San Diego, California, May 15, 1930.*