



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Owls, owls and more owls

There've been some interesting phone calls arriving on both my home and travelin' phones that are giving me cause to suspect the alien barred owl population (from the eastern USA and Canada) may be on the rise, and people are confusing them with our native great gray owls.

Great grays are owls of the open spaces of the high country with evergreen forests. They like to hang out on the edges of meadows, hiding in the thick foliage of evergreens, waiting for gophers and other meadow dwellers to (literally) show their heads. They're very uncommon in juniper and sagebrush country, sticking pretty much to high country pine forests and open meadows.

The barred owl, on the other hand, is a generalist; it can get along with just about any small prey, and as far as I know doesn't give a hoot about what kind of habitat it's in. They are also a great deal smaller than the great gray, and they seem to be popping up more frequently near Bend and Sisters.

The species do look somewhat alike at a quick glance. Both have no horns/ears, both have a very noticeable facial disk, and both have similar coloration. However, their very distinct differences are size and eye color. The great gray is gigantic by comparison (bigger than a great horned) and has yellow eyes, while the barred is much smaller (about the size of a small chicken) and has all-black eyes.

Great grays were having a tough time of it not too long back — and still are in some areas — because of habitat loss. Unfortunately, there's a direct conflict between the owls' need for a jackstraw understory and the fire-danger requirements to eliminate that jackstraw understory, known as "ladder fuels." This conflict has been eliminated in some areas with the installation of nesting platforms large enough allow the owlets to remain in the nest to fledge.

Unfortunately, like most owls, the great gray select nests that are handy, that don't have to even resemble

a "nest," and because they like to choose a nesting site located on the edge of forests, close to their favorite food supply — voles, mice and gophers — that's "home."

The so-called "nest" is often a broken-off tree about 20 to 40 feet high. The (sort-of) flat surface with broken parts of the stub seems to meet with approval for great grays. The female lays her eggs in among the stub's debris, fluffs up her skirt and somehow keeps them warm, and they hatch.

Within two weeks, there's no room at the inn. Baby owls — especially great grays — grow very rapidly. Mom and dad are great providers, so within two weeks or so their babies are about twice as big as when they hatched, and begin shoving each other around.

If the "nest" is in a broken-off lodgepole pine or old accipiter nest, and if there's two or more babies, they soon begin pushing against each other so harshly that one or more is pushed out of the nest. Most nests are somewhat out of the way of visitors, so no one comes along to see the "poor little baby owl" on the ground and take it to a rehabber.

That's OK. Old Dame Nature took care of the business of great grays falling out of nests a long time ago. Baby great gray owls have enormous feet, and with those long toes, sharp talons and strong legs, they can climb small trees like nobody's business.

That's when the jackstraw understory comes into play. The baby owl climbs to the top of the stick — sometimes doing it vertically — and starts squawking for food. The parents take care of the stranded owl as if it were still in the nest, and often, the youngster will remain on the top of that pole, being taken

care of by the adult — even after it fledges.

On the other hand, barred owls will use an old raptor, magpie nest, or pike of sticks that holds all the babes in the nest to fledging time, and as generalists, can make a living on just about anything small that moves within a half-mile of the nest, be it birds, frogs, snakes, lizards, mice, gophers or even stinky baby skunks.

But all this may come to naught if a "tiger of the air" — the great horned owl — moves into or already occupies the area. No owl is safe when one of those tigers moves in. Even smaller, cavity-nesting species, such as northern elf, ferruginous, saw-whet, screech and flammulated owls will leave a nesting territory if a great horned shows up.

Years ago I helped to conduct a northern spotted owl survey for the Forest Service. One of the protocols was if a great horned answered the spotted owl survey call you were to fold up shop and leave the area immediately. South of Gilchrist, on the east side of Highway 97, I had a calling site like that; all it took was one spotted owl call, and a great horned responded with gusto and I hit the trail.

When it comes to strange

calls or sightings that you're not sure of, please do your best to obtain a "voucher photo." That's really the only way everyone can be absolutely sure what you're observing is, or is not, what you think it is. If you show it to local bird experts, Tom Crabtree of Bend or Chuck Gates of Powell Butte — what they say it is gospel.



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Great gray owl.

Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife non-game biologist Simon Wray (simon.n.wray@state.or.us), of Bend's Central Region office is on top of every call he gets regarding non-game wildlife. The U.S. Department of Fish & Wildlife appreciates the same when someone reports a spotted or barred owl. It would be of far greater importance if the biologists were to receive a voucher photo when someone tells him of a sighting that he or she is not quite sure of.

Even if you don't have a photo, please don't hesitate to share any special wildlife observation you may encounter. You're there to experience it, I'm not, and if what you're reporting sounds like a mystery, I may be ready to go to the scene with you and we do some looking together, and share what we find. You just never know...

Give me a shout at jim.naturalist@gmail.com; travelin' phone: 541-480-3728, or home phone: 541-388-1659.



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