

## The Ardent Owl



SUSAN SANFORD

WE HAVE MANY OWLS IN Southwest Florida, from the buff-colored burrowing owls of Cape Coral and the small-eared screech owls of Pine Island to the tall-eared, boom-voiced great horned owls of just about everywhere else. But no bass hooter rouses us from sleep more quickly than the plaintive, quavery screech owls that have nested on our Pine Island property for several generations.

Their sleep-disturbing song is a cross between a whinny and a wail, and can only be described as coming from the netherworld of sound. The sad, fluttery, flute-like notes that flow across our pond are all the more eerie because they're also enticing. On more than one occasion, I've gone out to meet them in the moonlight.

The face of the screech owl is another story. He looks boyishly ET-ish—more surprised than surprising, and more attentive than frightening. Under grave, bushy eyebrows, this little owl's half-lidded eyes are full of wonder as my flashlight probes the upper limbs of a Jamaican dogwood. We love screech owls, not only for their singing, but also for their hunting skills. They keep the mice and rats at respectable numbers, and give our superior-seeming snowshoe Siamese cat something to

think about as she prowls like a wisp of white-footed fog around the pond.

For dignity and power, though, no owl is more impressive than the king of owls—the great horned. This bulky forest denizen seems to sport the horns of the devil. Naturalists still call him “the feathered king” or “the tiger of the woods.” We call him cat owl—for good reason. Often on crisp nights, we hear

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our old friend—or fiend—hooting at the house. He’s got a five-beat bomb of a voice, hollow and round and more penetrating than any other owl. He hoots in the last light of day, and his piney wood serenade goes, *Hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo*. One long, two short, then two more subtly hesitated shorts.

Do great horned owls *talk*? Is this lonely soliloquy of theirs a form of question and answer? Or just a question without an answer? Some naturalists say that owls mark their territory in nocturnal hoots. Others say they’re heralding the coming of night and the arrival of dawn. All the way back to the ancient Greeks, naturalists have theorized that owls hoot for the same reason tigers roar—to scare their prey into scampering across a field or wooded area.

Scientists also believe that owls call for want of a mate. This happens primarily in the fall and early winter in Florida. There is something of the lovelorn in the call at that time...Or is that just our imagination? At any rate, our great horned owl’s nestlings are found in February under a tree, where we also find scattered pellets of coughed-up mouse.

There’s nothing quieter than an owl on the wing, and even a soft-footed cat can be taken unaware. These superb

hunters also eat skunks, possums, rabbits, mice, rats, squirrels, grouse, ducks, snakes, beetles, moths and fish.

Sitting on the lanai one night, we see our great horned owl just 10 yards away; his double-large yellow-glare eyes are clearly visible in the fading twilight. When you see an owl up this close, you understand why this judicious-looking bird has been tradition-

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ally credited with wisdom, or why Native Americans believed owls were a harbinger of the spirit world and would appear before someone died.

Years ago, we had some owl feathers mounted on a board as a kind of abstract, natural collage. One day a Native American friend of ours stared at the owl’s banded, light-brown feathers, smiled warily and warned, “That’s like putting death on your door. You might attract something you don’t want.”

We took down the framed, feathered board. There is a similar superstition about placing conch shells within your home. As explained by a Puerto Rican friend, “Such shells are houses for ghosts, *duppies*, *jumbies*. You don’t want them in the house with you.” So our conch shells and our owl feathers stay outside our house now.

And that brings us back to the great horned owl that lives just beyond the barrier of pine trees in our yard. One evening, while sipping tea on the lanai, I was so taken with his clear melodic hooting that I, almost without thinking, hooted back at him. The king put on a look of injured dignity. “Who, who who, who who are you?” he seemed to say.

“You, you you, know who!” I hooted back.

The false feathered ears flattened and raised. Then he leaned forward and pumped out a five-beat accusation. It seemed aimed right at me.

My wife said, "I believe he's angry at you."

"Let's see," I said bravely.

We went outside into the moon shadows. There was the old fool scowling at us from his throne. When he saw me coming, he dropped a little lower, and his wings cocked open.

"Look out," my wife warned, "he's getting ready to fly right at you!"

I hooted as best as I could, imitating that hollow beat pretty well, I thought; and the king came off his perch and headed toward me.

I actually had to duck to get out of his way. But I felt the wind from his wings, and the hairs on my neck stood up. He was gone.

And that was that. Then, the next night, walking around our pond, the owl followed me from tree to tree, hooting like I was his long lost pal—or worse, his wife. I cut my nature walk short and went back inside.

In *The Nightwatchers*, I learned that the larger great horned owls were females. So my stalker was a woman; and it wasn't my miserable hide she was after, it was my winsome heart. I have to confess that all my life I've wanted to be close to an owl—not *that* close, but near enough to see the feather pattern perfectly.

But those rapier talons of his—I mean *hers*—were another story. They bristled by my ear when, two nights later, she swooped down on me by surprise. I threw up my arms in defense. For a moment, in midair, she beat her wings against my face. Then, once again, she was gone. But this time she didn't go away for good. Sulking in a nearby tree, she eyed me as if to say, "You're not who I thought you were!"

After a little while, she went off. I've heard her often since then, but haven't seen her. One night she did leave me a small token of her affection, a lovely feather. But you don't have to ask. I left it outside where it belonged. And I don't hoot at owls anymore—and neither should you. †

*Pine Island's Gerald Hausman has written more than 35 books for children and adults, including The Mythology of Horses (with Loretta Hausman).*