

Owl Moon Remembered by Philip Krajewski

One of the great joys and responsibilities of parenting is sitting down and reading a book as a daily practice with your children as they grow. Small plastic books with squeaky centers and brightly colored pictures usually spend more time in the mouth than on the lap and are a fun way to start the process. As time progresses, tales about dogs that dig forever or ducks that stop traffic as they traverse unfazed to their favorite city pond give way as other 'more mature' books are discovered.



The utter delight of being a giant looking over the top of a small head and down at the tiny fingers fiddling with pages and pointing to pictures has sent water to my heart on more than a few occasions. At some point, the William Steig collection is brought out and the content turns this essential interaction into a surprising journey of personal revelation. From *Doctor De Soto* or *The Amazing Bone* to *Solomon the Rusty Nail* and *Shrek!*, Steig's books are an unforgettable part of the experience of growing together.

It is at this reading level, and before the more advanced *Winnie the Pooh* and E.B. White's standards of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, that I discovered the Jane Yolen masterpiece, *Owl Moon*. It is the story of a father and a daughter who go out on a bright, frigid winter night to carry on the family tradition of calling in a great horned owl. After they are successful in their hope filled quest, they walk triumphantly down the hill warmed by the experience. As we read this book, our enthusiasm turned into the action of "Hey, let's try this!" Although we never saw an owl on that particular moonless, warm, summer night my fascination with *Bubo virginianus* was born with the experience and has never waned.

A few years later, while crossing our stream one evening in our '71 Toyota Land Cruiser (a bridge has replaced 25 years of fording), to our complete astonishment we caught sight of a great horned owl standing on a rock in the rushing water. What was this bird doing? The next day I opened *The Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John Terres, and found the extraordinary answer: hunting aquatic creatures like crayfish! This tasty morsel was a part of a list that was so extensive as to defy credibility. The 'wise old professor' owl finds the time, between intellectual pursuits, to eat almost all the other owls, all the hawks, and such assorted tasties as skunks, porcupines, shrews, rabbits, domestic cats and small dogs, frogs, perch, bullheads, Canada geese, robins, great blue herons, beetles, grasshoppers, etc., etc., etc. This "winged tiger" seems to eat anything that runs, hops, crawls, flies, burrows or hides, like a swift down a chimney (true), or a crow snoozing safely on a nighttime roost. In short, if you are a living heat source in North America, BEWARE!

After digesting this owl dietary information, the pellet of wisdom that immediately surfaced was that my vigilance would have to be heightened lest my small daughter be viewed as wandering two-legged fodder.

As we prepared for another 'calling in', further study revealed the great horned owl

was the ultimate warrior when it came to defending territory and was known to have sunk its talons deep into the back of a person too near to its nest. It was also documented that the wearing of a fur cap could be misconstrued as dinner. Psychologically reoriented, my imagination meshed with a new sense of reality as we set off to visit the powerful inner beatings of the natural world. A black-capped chickadee, landing on my hat dented with bird feed, flutters the air and mildly rushes the adrenaline; however, a silent nighttime swooping-in of the ultimate avian killer presents a real test for my courage.

The moon was full, a dry crisp snow covered the field, the below-freezing air popped the trees on the woodline, and we stood vulnerable to the night as I registered a loud “Who-who-who-who-who” on an early January evening a few years ago. We had heard two great horned owls calling the previous night, likely in the courting stage of the breeding process. My imitation of the call of this very large owl was certainly better than my attempt at a screech owl, but my continued calling proved to be fruitless.

Just as we were about to leave, the call of one ‘hooter’ increased in loudness, but was still distant. I hooted again. Although my excited efforts did not result in a ‘coup,’ the owls louder answering indicated it was coming closer. However, the proximity diminished as the sound trailed off into the woods. Surely the owl saw three people shivering out in the open field and decided we were too large to eat, or not a threat, and flew off.

Recently, I re-read *Owl Moon* and uncovered a small detail that seemed to contribute to the father's ability to bring the owl to him. After they received no response from the owl at the edge of the field, they walked into the woods to a small clearing beside a tree and called in this great owl while hidden from view.

We have again revitalized our owling spirit the past two weeks and implemented this tactic with a few new additional tools, but still have not been successful. This has been the quietest winter that I can recall for great horned owl duets. I am sure that there is a natural reason for their silence, as our home area has always been a strong owl habitat. However, we are determined to call in *Bubo Virginianus* before the winter crosses over the spring line. When we realize our owling goal, we will look this majestic creature in the eye, acknowledge its state of grace, say “hello,” turn, and walk triumphantly down the hill. With our owl odyssey complete, we will enter into the house, shed our jackets, sit down, and . . . read a good book.

Birdwatch appears the second Wednesday of the month in the Outdoor Section of the Wellsboro Gazette. The Tiadaghton Audubon Society meets the third Wednesday of the month (Sept. – May) at the Gmeiner Cultural Center, Wellsboro, Pa. Please visit our website at www.tiaudubon.org.