



by Isak Kvam

Owls Of The BWCAW

Spotting an owl up in a towering pine while out in the Boundary Waters is an inspiring wildlife encounter. Minnesota is home to twelve different owl species, and about eight of these inhabit the BWCAW.

I first started birding in college, during a six-week ornithology course at Luther College in northeastern Iowa. Classes flip-flopped between lectures about the life histories and distinguishing characteristics of birds and field trips, binoculars and bird lists in hand, frantically trying to identify as many birds as we could. Birding, I learned, can be pursued nearly anywhere. You can keep an eye out for hawks on telephone poles while driving around. You can glance at your birdfeeder out in the backyard. Out of all the birds I've observed, owls remain my favorite.

Why owls are so special

Owls have a universal allure. Birders and non-birders alike have an affinity for owls. There's just something about them. Each species of owl is distinct with a unique story to tell, and if you know where to look, you can enjoy seeing one on your next wilderness adventure.

I'm one of the fortunate Minnesotans who grew up vacationing in the BWCAW. My first trip as a nine-year-old hooked me for life. I was in paradise canoeing between islands, exploring trails beyond our campsites, jumping off the rocky shorelines into the clear, cold lakes. Now I enjoy visiting in all seasons, from a few weeks on the Gunflint Trail in early January through the summer heat and into the fall. However, when I head to the BWCAW

these days, I no longer focus on fishing or how many miles we can cover. What grabs your attention much more than a warbler or eastern bluebird? Maybe it's their large size, their revolving neck taking stock of the scene, or their mysterious personalities and probing, disc-shaped eyes that hold a sense of wisdom.

Before describing the eight owl species you can find in the BWCAW and how to identify them, it's helpful to start with what makes an owl an owl. Owls are birds that are distinctive for their large, forward-facing eyes surrounded by a large funnel structure called a facial disc. This gives owls their great depth perception—the binocular vision that is key to their hunting abilities. Their hooked bills and sharp talons make them formidable hunters, and most owls specialize in hunting a specific kind of prey. Smaller owls tend to eat insects, while large ones eat mammals and small birds. The great horned owls will even hunt other owls.

Owls are mainly nocturnal animals. They sleep during the day and wake during the night, leaving their nests in tree cavities and crevices to hunt. If you're ever lucky enough to find a group of owls, the collective nomenclature is a parliament of owls. (This sounds much more wise and appealing than, say, a murder of crows.)

In order to properly identify an owl in the field, you'll want to learn their calls and physical appearance. Contrary to popular knowledge, not all

owls hoot. Each does have its own distinctive sound, whether a song or a call, and it's often easier (and more accurate) to identify an owl by its sound than by its appearance. Of course, it's also helpful to know their identifying features. When you see an owl in the field, take note of its size, the shape and color of its bill, and any distinct facial markings or colored feathers. You can always check your bird book back at camp, but when you see an owl, take a good long look at it, memorizing every little detail you can. Learning what to look for is really about learning how to see, and you'll come to appreciate the many subtle details of an owl's appearance. Memorizing the common sounds and identification marks of owls will pay off when you meet one in the field.

The Boundary Waters is a very special place to search for birds because it's right on the southern fringe of Canada's boreal forest. The boreal forest consists of conifers and vast wetlands that lie between the treeless arctic and temperate forests further south. This unique ecosystem is home to more than 150 bird species which gives us the opportunity to see birds not found anywhere else in the country.

The two most common owls you'll find in the Boundary Waters are the barred owl and the northern saw-whet owl. If you don't want to spend a lot of time memorizing lots of bird sounds and identification marks, these are the two owls to learn for your next



The Barred Owl is the most common of the eight species of owls found in the Boundary Waters area. Its distinctive call, "who cooks for you" is often heard at dusk by BWCAW campers.

trip. They're very distinct from one another. The barred owl is about 21 inches tall while the northern saw-whet is the smallest northern owl at only 8 inches. However, there are a handful of other owls you may find in the BWCAW, including, great gray owls, northern hawk owls, great horned owls, snowy owls, and boreal owls. If you know what and where to look for them, you'll increase your chances of experiencing an unforgettable encounter.

Barred Owl

Strix varia

The barred owl is the most common owl species in the Boundary Waters. It's a stocky, brown, medium-sized owl with distinctive dark brown eyes (the only common owl around here to have brown eyes). Its belly is streaked with vertical brown and white bars, which give it its name: barred. Its bill is yellow, and it lacks ear tufts (those rising feathers that look like ears), so barred owls have a rounded head.

The barred owl's call is strong, distinctive, and iconic: hoo hoo ho-ho, hoo hoo ho-ho-hawl — a voice that birders say sounds like “who cooks for you, who cooks for you all.” Once heard, you'll instantly recognize it in the field.

Barred owls are mostly nocturnal, and while you might hear their call any time of day, your best chance is in the evening. They're crepuscular, which is a fancy way of saying they like to come out in the early evening. They hunt for small mammals, and they like wetter areas. To maximize your odds of spotting one, head out after dinner and seek out a habitat with old, tall trees and a relatively open understory—especially if there's a wet valley nearby. Woodlands and wooded swamps will be your best bet.

Boundary Waters Journal contributor and wilderness guide Rob Kesselring has de-

scribed decades of wilderness tripping experience and has seen many barred owls in the Boundary Waters. Their characteristic call carries over the water, filtering through the tree branches that overhang campsites: “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you, all?” It is a fitting call for a bird that comes out around dinnertime.

On one particular trip, Rob and his group were gathered around the campfire, chatting away until the owl's call slowly got louder, then louder, then suddenly it showed up right in camp, only ten feet from the party! It's one thing to spot an owl, but completely another to have one saddle up and join your campfire to see what's making all the racket in the great Northwoods.

Barred owls don't migrate, opting instead to remain solitary permanent residents in an area spanning only a few miles. They're also long-term occupants of the Northwoods, historically speaking. Scientists have found Pleistocene fossils of barred owls in Ontario dating back 11,000 years. Barred owls have a relatively long lifespan; the oldest recorded barred owl on record lived right here in Minnesota for just over 24 years.

While the barred owl is a predator that targets mice, chipmunks, and squirrels as their main prey, they occasionally eat smaller birds. Barred owls can be mobbed by woodpeckers, jays, and crows that view them as predators, spooking them off to a different area. But even then, barred owls have to be careful. They're hunted by larger great horned owls, which are also present in the BWCAW. If a great horned owl takes up residence in the same territory as a barred owl, the barred owl will opt to move to a new, safer area.

Saw-whet Owl

Aegolius acadicus

The northern saw-whet owl,

often just called the saw-whet, is the owl you're second most likely to run into on BWCAW trips. This brown, ultra-fuzzy owl has a very distinctive large head and a white-colored V on its face between its yellow eyes. Its body is mainly brown with white streaks on its chest and white spots on its wings. Adults are a measly 8 inches tall, about the same size as a robin but with a much bigger head. Its small size makes it more difficult to see, but don't worry, you can identify this owl easily by its voice. Just don't be fooled, saw-whet owls don't hoot, they toot.

The song of saw-whets is usually heard at night and comes in steady whistled toots: too-too-too-too. The pitch sounds like someone is playing a single note once or twice a second on a recorder.

Sue Plankis, a seasoned naturalist who guides canoe and birding trips with Rob Kesselring, was once leading a group off the Sawbill Trail when they heard the light whistles of saw-whet owls. “Our participants didn't get to see them, but they got to experience hearing their call,” Sue said. If you don't know what you're listening to, you might mistake their sound for something completely different. When Sue's group got back to Sawbill Outfitters, they learned people in the nearby campground had mistakenly been complaining about not being able to sleep the night before thanks to some trucks that had their back-up beepers sounding off all night. “The too-too of the owls sounds a lot like a truck backing up,” Sue said.

“People think all owls make the hoot-hoot-hoot call like the great horned owl, but a lot of owls have a really unusual call that you might not immediately recognize as an owl,” Rob adds.

Since saw-whets are so small, you're much more likely to locate and identify them by their



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sound than by sight. They're nocturnal and reclusive, and during the day they prefer to roost in dense foliage like a thick branch of an evergreen tree near the trunk at about eye level to twenty feet up. That doesn't mean you'll only find them in coniferous forests.

Saw-whets nest in a wide range of wooded habitats. Your best chance of finding one is definitely during the spring, when they're migrating and much more abundant. Since they're a smaller owl, they mainly hunt for mice.

Great Gray Owl **Strix nebula**

The great gray owl is the largest owl by length at about 27 inches tall. They have a very long tail and are easily distinguished by uniform soft gray colors (sometimes with a bit of brown streaking) and a black and white marking on the neck that looks like a bow tie. This owl has very, very large facial discs (the funnels that sur-

round their eyes), which give it a very serious and dignified look. It's a good thing they're easier to identify by sight because they're very quiet and solitary. If you do happen to hear their song (usually heard during mating season), it's a series of longer, drawn-out hoots: hoo- ... hoo- ... hoo.

Great gray owls prefer dense evergreen pine forests and sub-arctic swampy forests. While they're not as common as barred or saw-whet owls, your best bet is to visit during wintertime and look along the edge of a coniferous forest at dawn or dusk. They love to perch along forest edges when they hunt, peering out with keen eyes scanning for small mammals like mice and chipmunks.

If you're lucky, your trip to the BWCAW will be during an irruption year. This is when a dramatic, irregular number of birds gather in a certain area. But unfortunately for birders, irruption years can't be easily

predicted. Boreal bird species in particular, like the great gray owl, are more likely to irrupt than other birds. Scientists think these birds irrupt when their normal range faces a food shortage (sometimes due to the owls overpopulating) or extreme weather that pushes them down into the Boundary Waters. There was a well-documented irruption back in 2004-2005, when hundreds of northern owls—great gray owls and hawk owls alike—flew down to Minnesota thanks to a rodent shortage in Canada.

If seeing a great gray owl is a high priority, plan a trip to the Sax Zim Bog instead of the Boundary Waters. The Sax Zim Bog is a fifty-minute drive northwest of Duluth. The majority of this 300-square-mile area is public land and made up of a mix of habitats that boreal birds like great grays love: bogs, lakes, aspen uplands, meadows, and farms. Better yet, much of Sax Zim Bog

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is crisscrossed with dirt and paved roads, which makes it easy to bird right from the road. (Since birds are much, much less afraid of vehicles than a person on foot, stay in your car on the road for a longer and closer experience with birds.) But don't worry, if getting out of the car and into the wild is more your scene, there are plenty of hiking and snowshoeing trails and bog boardwalks in Sax Zim too. Head to the Welcome Center during your visit to know where to go and learn about their annual birding festival in February.

Your best chance of spotting a great gray owl in winter at Sax Zim Bog is during relatively nice weather. Great grays don't show themselves as often on clear, windy, and bitter cold conditions; instead, you'll tend to see them on calm and cloudy winter days. Check along Zim Road and County Road 27 near Luikkenen and

Yoki Roads. They've been spotted near there in previous years. If you strike out there, check Overton Road west of Owl Avenue, as well as Admiral Road and County Road 7. If you get lucky, you might even spot some other owls that frequent the area: northern hawk owls, snowy owls, barred owls, boreal owls, and great horned owls too.

Northern Hawk Owl **Surnia ulula**

Hawk owls, similar to great gray owls, can be seen in the BWCAW in the wintertime. They're a medium-sized owl that has a hawk's long, tapered tail, short wings, and an owl's large head and fluffy chest. The distinctive identifying mark of hawk owls is their white face outlined by a thick black border. Beginning birders sometimes mix up the brown, striped belly of the hawk owl with the barred owl (remember: the barred owl's stripes are ver-

tical, but the hawk owl's stripes are horizontal), so remember that the northern hawk owl has the black border outline on its face.

Hawk owls are diurnal, up during the day and sleeping at night. They don't like the dense conifer stands like some other owls; they prefer open, sparse forests and recently-burned areas. This means you might be more likely to see one on Sea Gull Lake, Alpine Lake, Jasper Lake, and the southern side of Red Rock Lake—the area that burned in the 2006 Cavity Lake Fire. While hawk owls like more remote areas, there was a record 475 of them counted in Minnesota during the 2004-2005 irruption winter. You might spot one perched on the highest treetops searching for mice and voles.

Other Owls of the BWCAW

There are a number of other owl species that live in the Boundary Waters. You might

encounter a great horned owl, with its characteristic ear tufts (the pointed feathers that look like ears) sprouting from the top of its head. That classic owl sound that most people imagine when they think of owls—hoo hoo hoo hoo—is the sound of the great horned owl. They're uncommon, but they are found throughout North America, roosting in trees during the day and hunting mice, rabbits, fish, and even other birds at night.

Snowy owls are winter visitors in the BWCAW that are colored white to camouflage with surrounding snow. If you're a fan of the Harry Potter series, then you'll know their look: Harry's pet owl Hedwig is a snowy owl. They spend their summers in the arctic circle and winter further south in Canada and the northern US, including upper New England and Great Lakes states like Minnesota. During irruption years, they spread across the Lower 48 and have been observed as far south as Texas and Florida. They tend to like big open areas, though, so while they're in the BWCAW, you're more likely to encounter one near a farm, field, or an airport while it hunts for rodents, birds, and rabbits.

Until recently, scientists thought boreal owls only visited the Boundary Waters in the wintertime. Luckily for birders, more and more reports have shared great news: boreal owls are nesting in the BWCAW, too. These small owls—only 10 inches tall—are only slightly larger than saw-whet owls, but they have a pale yellow bill and a dark V shape on their forehead, which gives them an angry expression. They hunt at night for small rodents and insects along forest edges and nest in the cavities of mature aspen or poplar groves.

Tips For Spotting Owls

One of the best tips to maximize your chances of seeing

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The Great Gray Owl is the tallest (27") of all BWCAW owls. They prefer to hunt small mammals along the edges of conifer forests.

an owl is to learn their sounds. Each owl has a distinct call or song, and by doing your homework before heading to the BWCAW, you'll be able to listen and identify sounds to help you identify the bird, and maybe even find it. Since owls are shy, you're much more likely to hear them than see

them.

The best resource I've found for learning each owl's song is the Cornell Lab's All About Birds website, which is my go-to place to learn more about a particular bird. The website includes recordings of owls' songs and calls as well as their identifying features, where



SUE PLANKIS

Northern Saw-Whet Owl



Northern Hawk Owl



BENJAMIN OLSON PHOTOGRAPHY

Great Horned Owl



Snowy Owl

you're likely to find them, and some interesting facts. Best of all, the website is very beginner friendly; you don't need to take bird classes or guided trips to follow along and learn. They also have a very handy app, Merlin Bird ID, that can be used to brush up your knowledge on identification and calls as well as identifying birds in the field. I've tried out a lot of different birding apps, and Merlin Bird ID is one of few that strikes a perfect balance of being easy to use and extremely helpful.

Once you've learned the calls for a handful of BWCAW owls, then you simply need to make time to listen during your trip. Sue Plankis' advice is to step away from the campfire during the evening—you wouldn't believe how loud crackling embers and small chatter can be until you've left it. Once you've left camp, head to a peninsula along the water. Since sound travels further over water, you really maximize your likelihood of hearing an owl hoot when you're close to water. If nothing else, you'll hear loons calling in the distance, their iconic voice echoing over the lakes and islands.


Now, I'm likely preaching to the choir, judging the BWJ readership, but bear with me: as birders, it's good practice to leave owls (and all birds) as undisturbed as possible. Owls are usually getting their much-needed rest during the day, and if you happen upon an owl roosting, you might force it to spend time and energy flying away to find a new spot to roost.

If you find a roosting owl, odds are it's already aware of you. They tend to stay camouflaged and sit as still as possible when they're agitated, so if an owl is already peering down at you, opt for your binoculars to get a better view instead of getting closer. If

there are young owlets in the nest, adults may get defensive; you don't want to challenge an animal with a razor-sharp bill and talons, especially in a place as remote as the BWCAW. Besides, the closer you get, the more likely an owl will fly away in search of a new roost, leaving your interaction cut short. For both your wellbeing and the birds', observe them with quality binoculars and leave them undisturbed as best you can.

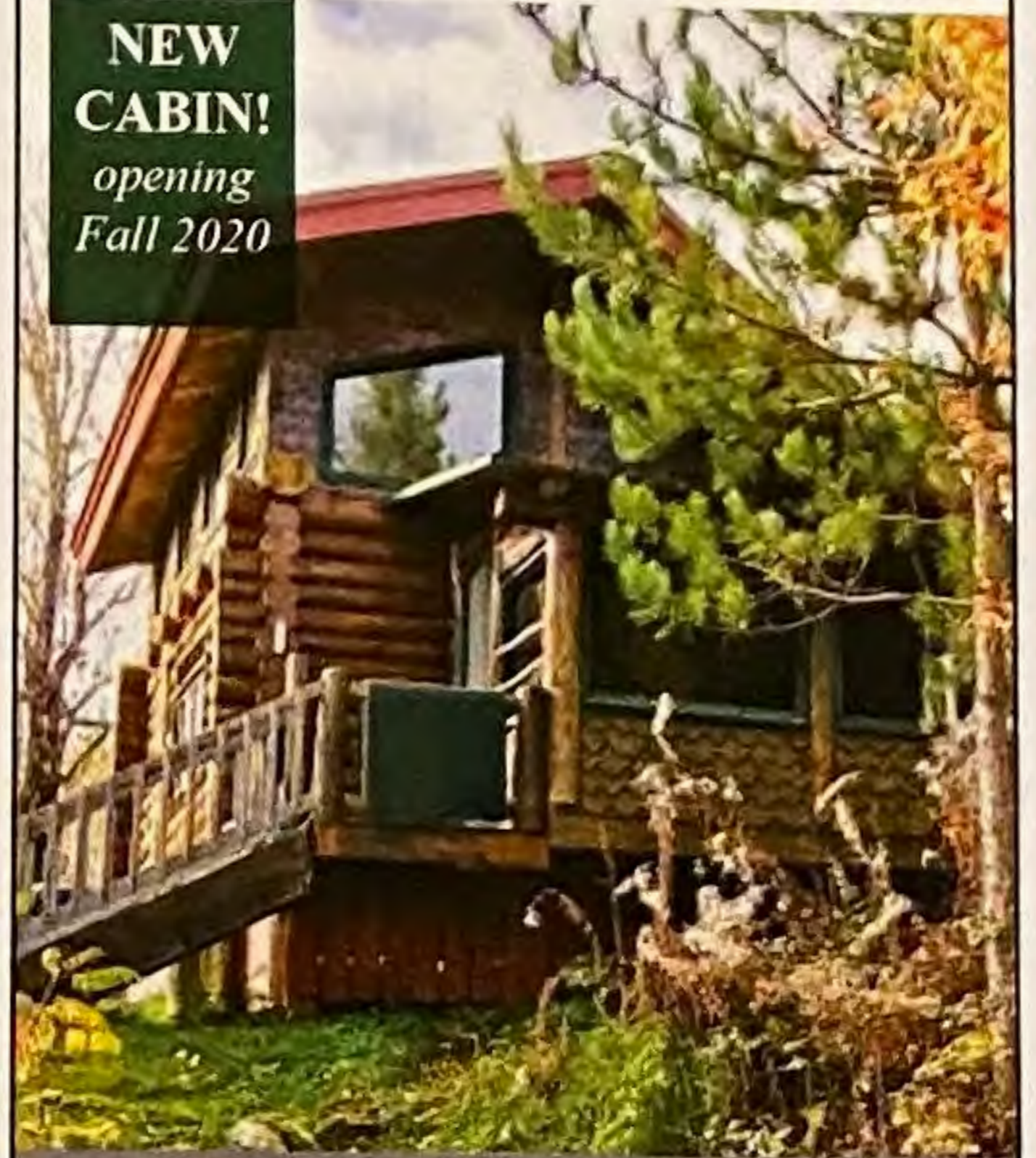
Finally, my last tip: you might encounter an owl when you least expect it. When I took my birding course in northeastern Iowa, the college was surrounded by prairies, oak savannas, and mature hardwood forests. This wasn't just great for our birding field trips, but it was great for recreation, too. I spent a lot of time hiking and running on the trails to unwind and take a break from school.

One morning in early spring, I was running along my favorite dirt path where the forest edge meets the prairie, the furthest trail from college that always seemed to be empty. I hadn't seen anyone all morning, and schoolwork was the last thing on my mind as I tread over crunchy snow and soft mud. I was focusing on my stride when I saw two yellow eyes peering at me through a tangle of branches: a northern saw-whet owl. I stopped in my tracks about 20 paces away while we sized each other up.

My heart was still racing, legs aching, but I hardly noticed. I only knew three owls at the time—barn, snowy, and great horned owls—and I didn't know mature owls could be this small. This fuzzy bird was a perched statue, immobile and staring with its wide eyes. The white V on its face made it look bothered and annoyed. Even though I stayed as still as I could, my intrusion had taken me too close; the owl squinted at me and silently flew away. 

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