

Great Gray Owl

12 May 1959

Quarry (east of Marshalltown), Marshall Co., IA

L. E. Mitchem

Mitchem 1968

Record Number: 81-GC

Classification: NA

REFERENCE

Mitchem, L.E. 1968. The Great Gray Owl -- in Iowa? IBL  
28:127-128.

VOTE (1981): 4-III, 3-IV

III, eye color.

III, good description.

IV, Date unlikely. Except for chin marking, data do not rule  
out short-eared Owl. Observer inexperienced; long lag between  
sighting and publication.

IV, Hawk Owl not ruled out completely.

IV, Single observer (with 12 yr old daughter) sighting. Rare  
bird seen at unusual time (May) unusual place (Iowa). IBL report  
(1968) written 9 years after observation. The description seems  
OK, but the fact that the observer is self-admittedly a learner  
and its delayed report mark this report.

III, Description adequate -- observer aware of rarity of  
species.

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THE GREAT GRAY OWL - IN IOWA?--An early morning haze still hung heavy along the river as we crossed the bridge and made a right turn on the gravel road that follows the Iowa river near the small town of Quarry. It was about five-thirty on a perfect mid-May morning; an ideal hour for a "birding" jaunt. My twelve year old daughter, sitting in the car by my side, had already proven her sensitivity and accurateness as a true birder. We had enjoyed several early morning hours together that spring, arising at five to return home again by seven-thirty in time to catch the school bus. Our bird life-list had increased considerably that year. I had begun my list in 1956 and now, three years later, I was about to add one of the real rarities!

Having the privilege of being in close association with several avid bird enthusiasts as well as two well-recognized bird authorities of our mid-west area, gave me opportunity to learn much beyond that which I eagerly read in books and magazines on the fascinating subject of birds. Roger-Tory Peterson's FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS EAST OF THE ROCKIES was my chief reference book those years and without it this particular May morning I could not have been so sure of the validity of our identification. By 7:30 A.M. this May 12, 1959, we were to return home with 36 species of birds on our list, all seen within a two hour period and the prize of them all was the Great Gray Owl!

He sat tall on a wooden fence-post about a rod to the right side of the road. The slow approach of my car as I turned the curve after leaving the bridge did not startle him and as I slowly brought the car to a stop and turned off the motor, he remained entirely motionless. I knew immediately we were witnessing a very rare sight. This was no common owl I was well acquainted with the Barred Owl, the only other owl an amateur might confuse with the larger Great Gray Owl. We were in such close range of this magnificent bird that the use of binoculars was hardly necessary for identification, yet with the glasses one could more clearly see the large yellow eyes and beak, the black chin marking and the very large prominent facial disks. His smooth round head and unusually long tail were additional marks for identification, as were the heavy length-wise stripes of his under-body. He was sitting in a perfect position for a thorough study of his markings. It was unbelievable that we were actually in the presence of this handsome owl, considered rare even in his natural habitat.

He stayed in the motionless position for a good ten minutes, during which time my daughter and I were checking and re-checking our bird guide against our prize specimen. The book so explicitly stated that this largest of all owls is a rare Northerner whose range did not include Iowa; yet, here he was within forty feet of our car, looking straight at us and giving us the rare privilege of studying his lovely plumage and fascinating facial markings for a good ten minutes! I felt a surge of joy overwhelming me, so awesome was the sight of this creature. How I longed to be sharing this moment with my birding friends, as much for the opportunity to establish positive proof to them of my "find" as to share my discovery. I questioned if they would believe my wonderful story.

I held not the slightest doubt of our identification, in spite of the descriptive paragraph in the bird-guide, which made no mention of the Great Gray Owl visiting Iowa. I remembered my ornithologist friends' statement that "the book doesn't always hold the final information" and that one of the most exciting facets of the bird-watching hobby is the constant anticipation of seeing the totally unexpected in previously un-reported places.

When this beautiful bird decided he had accommodated us sufficiently, he suddenly lifted his huge wings and flew off toward tall trees lining the river bank. His wing spread appeared to be at least four feet, or more, as he swooped low to the ground before lifting himself higher into the trees and out of our sight. The view of that majestic bird flying was almost as exciting as seeing him in a perched position! We were reluctant to see him leave, yet fully aware of our good fortune of having him remain long enough for such thorough study.

My birding friends were going to hear an exciting "bird" tale as soon as I could reach my phone. I wondered if they would think it only the typical "fish tale" often jokingly told by fisherman? But this bird story was no "bird tale", nor was it a joke; it really happened!

The two recognized bird authorities I refer to were: Mrs. J. Ray King of Grundy Center and Mrs. John Barlow in Cedar Falls, both now deceased. Both of them encouraged me to report my story to a wild-life publication, which I have failed to do prior to this date. Dr. Martin Grant, on the staff at University of Northern Iowa, has suggested I submit it now. Homer Rinehart, a licensed bird-bander, and Mrs. Roy Grimes, both of Marshalltown, are among those acquaintances of which I speak. LUCILE E. MITCHEM, R.R. #2, Marshalltown.