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Tom Kent  
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Dear Tom:

This letter will serve to describe as completely as possible the owl I saw on 10 January 1996, at about two in the afternoon of an overcast day, very near my home in Finchford. I saw this bird perched in a tree along the edge of the woods to the east of my driveway as I was going to town. I was in the passenger seat, closest to the ditch; we had just pulled out onto the road and were going quite slowly as we passed the bird's perch. I saw the owl, noted that it was an earless owl, and then turned to look as we passed, because the owl was so very large, and I was close enough to have a very good view of it. It was low in the tree, and the road is raised, so it seemed to be nearly at eye level. It did not move or fly, except it seemed to turn its head to follow the car. I vowed to look it up in my bird guides when I came home, which I did. My impression that evening was that I had seen a Great Grey owl, but when I looked up its habitat, it seemed impossible since the guides said it was a bird of the far north. I used *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds*, Eastern Region; and *Birds of North America*.

Place: Rather low (about where the first large branches come out of the trunk) in a maple tree growing among some cedars at the edge of a deep ditch along a built up county road (Winslow Road) in the place where a dirt farm road, the edge of a woods, and the wooded bank that marks the east line of my property all come together. My property is at the east edge of the village of Finchford (unincorporated) in Union Township in the northwestern-most corner of Black Hawk County, where it borders Butler and Bremer Counties. Finchford is 8 miles south of Waverly, 4 miles SW of Janesville, and 12 miles NW of Cedar Falls.

Appearance: It was a very large owl, the largest by far that I have ever seen. I would estimate its height to be approximately 24" from feet to head. Though not as large as the eagles I have seen along the Mississippi, it was definitely larger than the red-tailed hawk or the barred owl, which I have also seen in the daytime here. It was grey brown in color with a markedly "owly" face. I noticed that it had no ears, but it did not appear to be as fluffy or feathery in front as the barred owl—that is, it did not seem to have the long black-streaked white front feathers of the barred owl, but appeared to be more an all-over or mottled color. I cannot say for sure that it had light eyes, but my impression was that it was looking right at me, and that I could see its eyes quite well. It turned its head slightly as we went past, but stayed on its perch. It seemed to be facing towards the open area of the ditch and farm road entrance. I was very curious about this sighting because it's appearance did not seem to fit any owl I knew.

Environment: Wooded river bottom with some open spaces and ponds. Farm fields, a sand and limestone quarry nearby, and the West Fork (of Cedar) River across the road to the north. It bisects a wooded county park, Thunderwoman Park, which is directly

across the road from both my property and the woods to the east. Deciduous trees are the majority, with some sections of planted pines and some cedars: old oaks, cottonwoods, willow, red and sugar maples, honey locust. Plenty of standing dead wood, and several more sections of mixed timber within the closest farm fields.

Local Wildlife: In this area we have beaver, coyote, red foxes, raccoons, possums, skunks, weasels, deer, muskrats, squirrels, rabbits, mice, voles, shrews—in general, a large variety of wildlife. Birds range from great blue heron, wood duck, Canada geese, and kingfisher to orioles, tanagers, bluebirds, kinglets, and cardinals. Wrens, warblers, thrushes, and vireos and all the usual birds in summer. Four (five, if you count flickers) varieties of woodpeckers are commonly seen, as well as pheasant, grouse, and a large flock of wild turkey. The neighbor and I have both seen as many as 20 or more flocked together. They sometimes roost in the park. We, of course, have nuthatches and finches (purple and gold) right now, chickadees and juncos. Frequently sighted or heard owls in this area: Barred owl, Screech owl, and Great Horned owl.

Please let me know if you hear of other sightings in my area, or if you need more information from me. My journal tells me it was mildish weather for January on that day (low 30's, upper 20's) with a sprinkling of snow, and that evening I heard coyotes nearby. If you are up this way, I will be happy to show you the spot. See below—

Sincerely yours,



Martha Waterman

