



A red phase Eastern Screech-Owl. Photo © Steve Sage.

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A Michigan Owls Winter Prologue

It happens only once or twice a year from within our country home, usually on a still winter night. We're asleep in bed when one of us wakes to a seemingly distant, low, monotone tremolo. The slumbering spouse is nudged with a whisper. "A screech owl's calling." The awakened one never minds. It is almost as if we subconsciously crave the contact – the acknowledgement that, yes, the owls continue to exist in the darkness outside our sheltering walls.

I can't imagine ever growing complacent about hearing an owl call. I suppose it could happen if one were sounding off every evening outside our window – a typical reflex toward anything ubiquitous. However, while an owl or two pass through all rural yards and many city yards most every night, they do so unseen, unheard, completely undetected. Their ability to exist in close proximity while, like ghosts, remaining beyond the range of our senses, not only belies our reaction toward commonality but piques our attention whenever their ethereal voices penetrate the night.

If you hear an owl call in Lower Michigan it is virtually a slam dunk to have been delivered by one of only three species, despite the fact that, surprising to many, up to ten can be found in the state. Perhaps just as surprising, the bulk of potential chances to encounter them occur in winter.

In Lower Michigan, three species – the Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl, and Barred Owl - are non-migratory, and are therefore permanent residents on their respective home ranges. These are, by far, the most commonly seen and heard.

The remaining seven comprise a list of migratory species from more northerly climes that enter the state in sporadic fashion - among species and between years - to spend the winter. Here they are, from smallest to largest.

The diminutive, but strikingly-patterned Northern Saw-whet Owl, slightly smaller than a screech-owl, can be considered, ecologically, as the northern counterpart to our more southerly permanent resident.

The closely-related Boreal Owl usually migrates no further south from Canadian boreal forests than the U.P. or northern-most Lower Peninsula. It may be the most difficult Michigan owl to find.

The Northern Hawk-Owl is aptly named due to its strongly diurnal tendencies and its habit of perching on exposed branches and powerlines. Like a roadside kestrel, it turns a keen eye toward any small mammal movement below. It rarely wanders below the boreal forests of northern Michigan in winter.

Two closely-related, medium-sized owls are named oppositely for the length of their ear tufts – the Short-eared Owl and Long-eared Owl. In terms of habitat usage, they are also opposites. The Short-eared roosts on the ground and hunts over open, overgrown fields, often during daylight hours. The Long-eared sticks to woods – coniferous or deciduous – and is highly nocturnal. One glaring similarity that never applies to any other owls here - both species are quite gregarious outside the breeding season. Loose flocks often roost and hunt in close proximity. Whether you can find them or not, where there is one there are usually more.



© Steve Sage
A winter U.P. trip may yield a close encounter with a Great Gray Owl. Photo © Steve Sage.

The Snowy Owl breeds on the tundra, and so, travels the furthest to get here. Keeping in step with that open, treeless landscape, individuals are typically spotted in wide-open spaces, like agricultural fields, airports and along our Great Lakes shorelines.

The Great Gray Owl, measuring over two feet tall, is North America's largest owl, however, don't be fooled by overall length. An especially long tail, in addition to an abundance of insulating feathers, hide the fact that there is not a lot of mass underneath. While other large owls will take relatively large prey, the Great Gray prefers to stick to mouse-sized meals. Like a few of the other Canadian migrants, it rarely wanders below the northern part of the state, but its diurnal activity and huge size make it quite visible to marveling viewers.

So, where's the Barn Owl? It's considered extinct here today. Prior to the lumbering era through the late 1800s, the mature forest communities dominating the state were not conducive to the presence of this open country species. Then, after the clear-cut, abundant farms and grazing lands dotted with, yes, barns, were perfect for the Barn Owl to thrive. Over the last half-century, however, forest succession in combination with more intensive, monocultural farming practices has eliminated almost all of this briefly abundant habitat type. Appropriately, the Barn Owl disappeared with it.

By and large, migratory owls away from their breeding home ranges emit few-to-no vocalizations. Their desire to call is triggered largely by territorial instincts against others of their kind, but in a wandering winter search for prey they aren't settled enough in any one place to defend it as "home." Since our three permanent residents are always home, they can and will vocalize in any month of the year. Therefore, it's helpful to get their calls down-pat.

In addition to the low tremolo described above, the Eastern Screech-Owl also emits a high-pitched but soft, descending whinny. In fact, neither vocalization is loud. A good rule-of-thumb when you hear one in the dark: The bird is closer than it sounds.

The Great Horned, while common for its size, is much less common than the screech by virtue of the fact that, very simply, larger predators require larger home ranges. Many screech-owl home ranges can exist within a single Great Horned pair's range. The deep, toneless hoots of the nicknamed "Hoot Owl" can carry over a half mile on a still winter night. The most common hoot-pattern can be recalled by keeping the words *Who's awake? Meee tooo* in mind.

The Barred Owl, a bit smaller than the Great Horned and once rare over much of Lower Michigan, has repopulated most rural landscapes to some degree. It inhabits mostly forested habitats and has a special affinity to lowland and floodplain forests. This owl may be active at any time of day or night and exhibits a more diverse vocal repertoire than any other native owl. The most commonly known memory-jogging phrase, converted to hoots, definitely requires an exclamation point: *Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?!* The hoots might more aptly be characterized as *whoops*. Other vocalizations involve repeated, spirited *whoops* and a series of rolling hoots. Vocalizations are usually delivered in a loud, boisterous, attention-grabbing fashion.



Who's awake? Meee tooo. *The low, toneless hoots of the Great Horned Owl are especially evident on windless winter nights. Pairs begin courting and nest-building in January.*

Photo © Steve Sage.

This column officially kicks-off our designation of this December as “Know Your Michigan Owls Month.” During next Sunday’s open hours, we will present our original Powerpoint presentation entitled, *Michigan Owls in Winter*. There is also opportunity to join one of our owling nights where the Powerpoint presentation is followed by time outside as we attempt to bring a screech-owl up-close with audio recordings. If none of these dates work for your December schedule, consider getting a small group of family or friends together for an intimate evening appointment any time between now and the end of March. More details on the following pages...

-Jim McGrath



Check out Sage Images

We regularly receive comments about the beautiful photos that adorn our newsletters and other promotional material. Many of them, like the stunning owl photos throughout this issue, are the work of our friend, award-winning nature and wildlife photographer, Steve Sage. Check out much more of Steve’s exceptional photography at www.sageimages.com. Thank you, Steve!

A Great Gray lift-off. © Steve Sage.

Catch Nature Discovery on Coffee Break Monday, December 9

Jim is scheduled to appear on Monday, December 9 at 9:15am, discussing owls and the annual Christmas Bird Count. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at lcc.edu/radio/onair/ or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at lcc.edu/tv/watch. We’ll post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.





A red phase Eastern Screech-Owl stares intently at a distant subject.
Photo © Steve Sage.

Michigan Owls in Winter

**Sunday,
December 8**

**Doors Open 1 to 5pm
Admission: \$5/person**

More species of owls can be seen in Lower Michigan in the winter than any other time of the year. In addition to the year-round resident Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl and Screech-Owl, a number of northerly species like Snowy, Short-eared, Long-eared, and Saw-whet owls wander southward into our neighborhoods in search of small mammal prey. At 2pm, sit-in on our original presentation, *Michigan Owls in Winter*. While viewing beautiful Powerpoint images, learn about the identification, behavior, habitat associations, migratory movements and vocalizations of all ten species located in the state, in addition to one that's now considered extinct in Michigan. Tips are also given on where to go and what to do to increase your chances of encountering them.

Come early or stay late to visit and interact with creatures from our huge zoo of Michigan reptiles & amphibians. Handle snakes. Feed turtles, frogs and salamanders. Ask for a guided walk on the trails. Our knowledgeable staff is on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit.

Note: Participants who attend the afternoon program are invited to **advance-enroll**, then return for guided "screech-owling" at 7:30pm that same evening. We'll try to draw one up-close with audio recordings in our yard or at a couple of roadside locations within a few minute drive of Nature Discovery. \$5/person, maximum 10 participants. Dress warmly and bring binoculars and/or a camera. Not recommended for small children.



Already, many Snowy Owls are being reported this winter in Lower Michigan and across the U.S. Find out where to go locally to see one!



Michigan Owls & Owling Night

***Monday, December 16 or
Friday, December 20
7 to 9pm***

Enroll for either date. The evening begins with a Powerpoint presentation over hot beverages and a snack.

Michigan Owls Up Close features all 10 species found in the state, plus one more that's now considered extinct here. We'll offer insight on the identification, vocalizations, behavior and ecology of each species. At the presentation's conclusion we will go into the night and attempt to "call one in" with audio recordings for a close encounter. Dress warmly and don't forget your binoculars and camera!

\$12/person. Limit, 10 participants. Advance enrollment required. Contact us to make a reservation. Not recommended for young children. Do you have your own small group of family and friends? Consider contacting us to make your own special appointment!

Holiday Break Birding Day Monday, December 23, 8am to 3pm

Recommended for students, 3rd grade and older with a special interest in wild birds. Join Jim for a whirlwind day of seeing how many species we can encounter in a 7-hour span. We'll drive to Maple River State Game Area, north of St. Johns, then return to bird a number of locations in the Greater Lansing area. Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, Shrikes, Snow Buntings and maybe even a Snowy Owl, are some of up to 50 species we may encounter by day's end. Each student will be provided with a personal Michigan Birds checklist to keep a running tally through the day. At day's end, we can arrange for your student to be dropped right at your door! Pack a bag lunch and binoculars and dress warmly. \$65/student. Enrollment is limited to 6.



Holiday Break Day Camps Monday, December 30 or Friday, January 3 9am to 3pm

Recommended for students, K & older. Enroll for one or both days of hands-on Michigan nature. Participants will interact with over 100 animals within our Michigan reptiles & amphibians zoo! Identify, handle and feed many of our 12 species of snakes, 10 species of turtles, 13 species of frogs and 9 species of salamanders. We'll watch and identify birds at our busy feeders and check them off on personal checklists. Lots of time outside and on the trails, as well! A photo of your student in action will be emailed to you. Hot lunch, hot chocolate and snacks provided. \$55/student/day.

Small Squirrel Skull Preservation

Thursdays, January 16 & 23, 4-6pm

Recommended for 9 yrs & older.

NOT for the squeamish! The activity begins with an introductory lesson about characteristics of mammal skulls, then the young biologists are given a freshly-boiled small squirrel head and the utensils required to

carefully tear away all the flesh, and they go to work. After a bleaching bath and polyurethane treatment the finished specimen, worthy of a museum case, is ready to take home for display on bureau or hearth!

\$50/student. Call or email to reserve a spot. Enrollment is limited to 5.

NOTE: For parental convenience, arrangements can be made for Jim to pick your student up after school at Montessori Children's House or at Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing and drive him/her directly to Nature Discovery.



Climate Change Realist

A number of thought-provoking articles can be found in the latest (Nov/Dec 2013) issue of *Orion Magazine*. For those not familiar with it, in the original 1982 issue the first Editor-in-Chief, George Russell, stated this mission: "It is *Orion's* fundamental conviction that humans are morally responsible for the world in which we live, and that the individual comes to sense this responsibility as he or she develops a personal bond with nature." Much more at www.orionmagazine.org.

In the latest issue, columnist Jay Griffiths writes *Myths of Stability: Putting Capitalism before Creation*. Here are a couple of short, related excerpts...

"The pseudoclimate of the economic system is given the attention and concern that the real climate needs. Financial well-being and economic stability are prized more than ecological well-being and climate stability."

"Perhaps the widespread refusal to believe in climate change is due to a fear that such a belief threatens the pseudoclimate, the artificial, overreaching system – which, indeed, must be disrupted if we are to address real climate change. Threaten that system and many people feel their minds under threat, which accounts for the fury directed at climate change activism.

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NATURE DISCOVERY 5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895

(517) 655-5349 naturedisc87@gmail.com www.naturediscovery.net