



Photos and story by Peter Bauer

An Owl Visitor

The fable about owls emphasizes how wise they are. Not speaking owl, I cannot attest to their wisdom, but I can say the ones I've encountered certainly seem *calm*.

Great horned owls represent what most of us think of when we hear the word "owl," and are readily identified: A large, robust appearing bird with large yellow eyes, flat facial disc, and the characteristic feather plumes extending above its head for the "horns." In the spring their "Who cooks for you?" call resonates through wooded areas. A Western Hemisphere bird, they adapt readily to a wide variety of habitats, extending their year-round range from just below the arctic circle to the tip of southern Chile. That means they can be found from the frozen north to the hot and humid tropics!

They are fierce hunters, able to take down mammals and birds even larger than they are. Cornell Lab of Ornithology claims they have been known to take down osprey and peregrine falcons! Also, I learned, they will eat skunks. I hope the local owls soon find the skunk that has been leaving tracks and residual odor around our home. Mostly though, they prey on smaller mammals and birds. Their eyes work especially well in the dark relative to many other species, which explains why they hunt mostly at dusk and at night.

In past years I have tracked down owl nests to photograph after hearing tips from other people. This winter, by contrast, I didn't have to go anywhere to see an owl. Coming home from skiing one day I was startled to



An owlet in its nest. The babies often gain the ability to exert weak chirps before they've even hatched. The juvenile owls generally first leave the nest a few weeks after becoming competent fliers, 10-12 weeks after hatching.



Clockwise from above: Fledglings in the Winthrop Cemetery.

Their talons can grip with great force, up to 500 psi. Humans, on average, hover around the 100 psi mark.

Our owl visitor, unflappable.



see an owl calmly perched in our front yard, completely in the open.

It regarded me sleepily, appearing undisturbed as I clicked the shutter repeatedly from 20 feet away. After an hour or two, allowing my wife and son to see it as well, it flew across the Methow River.

That, we thought, was that.

Not so. Two days later, like a yard ornament, it sat by our house again, again in the open. Photography had never been so easy. After a long rest, it disappeared for the day, only to appear yet another time two more days later, posing, as always, for us to admire.

The only clue we had to this

unusual behavior was the pile of dove feathers distributed in a circle in the snow-covered lawn we noted the first day it arrived. We have a lot of birds come to our multiple birdfeeders. Perhaps the owl had decided that a buffet had been set for it, and it might as well sleep near the potential feast. Whatever the reason, the owl bestowed a gift of nature on us.



When he retired in 2013, Peter Bauer moved from Wenatchee to Winthrop for the snowy winters and closeness to nature. His blog, "American Safari," celebrating the beauty of the animal world (mostly birds), can be found at pbauwa.wordpress.com.