



# Who You Calling a Pygmy?



A fierce little predator.

Photos and story by  
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If you're the type of person who roots for Rocky Balboa against more highly touted opponents (and who isn't?) then you gotta love our Northern Pygmy owl. A fierce little hunter, this 7-inch long, 2-ounce bird (for comparison, robins are 9-11 inches long) will tackle birds

and rodents up to three times its size. Imagine something this small taking down a chicken or a squirrel!

They tend to be a 'sit-and-wait' predator, relying on surprise to aid their hunt. I witnessed a logical corollary to using surprise as a key tactic: once you've been discovered, your chances of suc-

cess go way down. While watching and photographing a Pygmy owl in Pearygin Lake State Park, I was astonished to see a Black-capped chickadee, prime prey for this owl, land in the same bush and sing its alarm call repeatedly while barely 4 feet from the owl. The owl made no attempt to chase the chickadee. They both

'knew' that, without catching the songbird off-guard, there was no hope the owl could make a meal of the smaller bird.

Full time residents in the mountainous Northwest, as well as western mountains farther south, I've only ever seen them in winter. Of course, spotting a bird

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The Northern Pygmy-Owl is tiny, but ferocious. Identifiable by their mostly dark brown and white plumage, smoothly rounded heads, long tails and extremely piercing yellow eyes. Another method for identifying the bird is by looking for packs of songbirds, which often group together as a defensive measure when one of these owls is around.



this small becomes easier when the leaves fall off the trees. Also, the snow and cold forces them to lower altitudes where their prey species, and I, spend the winter.

They have two characteristics which endear them to this photographer. First, they are diurnal (daytime) hunters, so you don't need a spotlight to find them. Second, they are about the least

timid wild bird you'll ever see (birds accustomed to being fed by humans don't count as wild in my book). The owl pictured in a gentle snowstorm at Pearygin Lake tolerated nearly half an hour of me clicking away, sometimes within just 20 feet of the eye-level bird.

It does have a challenge it shares with other small preda-

tors: it's in the middle of the food chain, with larger raptors, including larger owls, regarding it as a food source. As a defense mechanism, the back of its head contains markings that look unmistakably like eyes. No hungry predator can be sure the Pygmy owl isn't watching them!

A few years after we moved into our current home, we were treat-

ed to a visit by a little owl hoping to feast on the California quail that populate our bush-and-tree-filled habitat. We waded out into the deep snow to get photos in the gathering gloom. We were enchanted by the diminutive owl. The quail, and that tree, are still here. We would welcome a repeat visit!