

OWL STRUCK

by Norbert Kovacs

I spotted the owl up a tall tree one morning as I returned through the woods by Shade Swamp. He was the size of a grown cat and gray with a wide head. He had round, very black eyes and a short, curved beak like a dark stone in the middle of his face. Every few minutes, he swiveled his large head at the call of a jay or robin from the woods, then looked away, composed as earlier.

He was only the second owl I had ever seen in the wild and he fascinated me. What did he mean to do perched up there all alone? I wondered. He soon noticed I was studying him, my brown head craned backward thirty feet below. His dark, cool eyes trained on mine and my brown, eager eyes held fast on his.

We had a long staring contest, the owl on his high branch and I on the woodland trail. Neither of us moved more than an inch or two. He shifted a gray feather only twice; I may have shifted my foot to a side and back. He cast the most intense of glares on me all the while, thin and awkward fellow that I am. He believed I was an inveterate enemy, hostile, I think, as any cawing crow.

Photo by Norbert Kovacs



I looked back as intently but in curiosity. My eyes dwelled on his rounded head, the soft, padded outside of his feathered front.

The owl, wondering perhaps how long our survey of each other might last, puffed his plump throat and shot a “huh-ooo!” down at me. The sound was deeper and more pointed than I thought an owl might make. He did not open his beak to do it as far as I could tell; maybe he was too supercilious to bother. In any case, I suppose he meant his “huh-ooo” to intimidate me the way it might a field mouse or other small prey.

The ploy didn't work. I was now more intrigued by him than before. How amazing that an owl can “huh-ooo” without opening his beak, I thought. And what a peculiar, insistent sound it was to hear! I fell to hoping he next might strut along his branch, again rustle his gray feathers, or show off some other habit of his. I held quiet in anticipation.

My owl seemed beside himself. His eyelids lowering, he let out a longer, harder “Huh-ooo” as if he had lost patience with me. I did not stir nor feel a bit perturbed. I marveled instead at his new, guttural speech, much more vigorous than his first. “How well it traveled among the close trees and their summer green leaves!” I thought. I couldn't have done the same, call as I might. The owl seemed really a master of acoustics! He had given my interest a new tweak, and my gaze held the more keenly on him.

Closeup of barred owl by Sparky Stensaas

The owl now seemed to realize he would not scare me. He faced away once, twice, tired of meeting my eyes.

At last, he could stand no more. He turned on his dark branch, opened his broad wings and flew past the oak trees.

Left to myself, I started slowly down the trail that led through the shaded woods to the pond. I went feeling a strange pride that the owl and I had looked at each other as long as we did. We had given each other a good study despite his discomfort and the novelty of the meeting. If the owl had never known a human, he did get a taste of our curiosity that morning.

I was glad, on my end, to have encountered him. We don't get to gawk at an owl just any day. If he proved proud and suspicious, he still showed me a face of the swamp woods I had not known.

