

## FIELD NOTES

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### Great Gray Owl

*Mark Wilson*

If numbers of excited observers are any yardstick of a bird's prominence, one can safely say few birds attain superstar status. I'm not talking Plum Island Little Egret or South Boston Gyrfalcon. Spiffy birds? Yes; superstars? No. I'm talking sold-out crowds. Traffic jams. People selling coffee and color 8 x 10's out of the van. Traffic cops looking through spotting scopes. Front page newspaper pictures (that's where I come in) and stories.

Think Ross's Gull, the first time. 1975. "Bird of the century," Roger Tory Peterson called it. Hundreds of people agreed and voted with their binoculars and scopes, scanning the Newburyport and Salisbury riverfront for a small, faintly pink gull. Zoom ahead twenty-one years. If I say Rowley, you say . . . ? Bingo. Great Gray Owl. Birdstock '96 in a wet field off a road called Wethersfield.

The owl would have done okay on its own, but over the course of a week, two prominent photos (both of my doing) of the owl ran in the *Boston Globe*. The first photo showed the owl coursing over a field, hunting voles. That ran on the first page of the Metro section. Several days later, the photo you see here ran on page one. At the *Globe*, the phone started ringing. People wanted prints of the owl. The woman that handled print request calls was ready to kill me. "I'm sick of that owl," she yelled to me. Apparently she was the only person to feel that way, since hundreds of people




GREAT GRAY OWL, MARK WILSON

jammed the narrow back roads of Rowley. Some residents came to resent the owl, or rather, the throngs of onlookers it attracted.

The page-one photo had impact, no doubt. The owl was looking at me from only a few feet away. I had purchased a high-speed camera that could take ten frames per second, so I could maximize my chances for a peak-action photo. One frame out of several rolls of film stood out. Taken with a wide angle lens, it captured the owl as it had just snagged a mouse. Its wings spread as it prepared to lift off. My speedy camera growled through film. And as it did, the owl flew, its wing brushing my head.

By the time the page-one photo ran, I had fled Rowley for the relative calm of Ontario, where my wife Marcia and I had ten Great Gray Owls in one day. A local told us that was down from a week prior when he had seen more than thirty in the same area. Nearby we found seven Boreal Owls. Two sat in one tree. But it was the Rowley owl that played ambassador. At times, birders seemed in the minority as crowds excitedly waited for views of the owl from crowded road shoulders. Unauthorized T-shirts sporting my owl photo appeared. Requests for Great Gray Owl prints reached a frenzy at the *Globe*. The woman taking print requests stopped talking to me (but only briefly).

The page-one photo of the Great Gray went on to the World Press photo competition in Europe, where it took a second place. For first place, the winner is flown to the Netherlands for the awards gala. For my second place, I received a very nice plaque. When the Great Gray Owl finally left Rowley, I sold the high-speed camera. I've seen many Great Gray Owls since Rowley, and I've made some interesting images, although none has equaled the photo you see here.

If you visit the fields of Birdstock '96 today, you'll find thirteen large homes sitting where the owl once hunted. I wonder if the homeowners know what a Great Gray Owl looks like. 

## The Last Heath Hen: A Story Never Before Told

*Editor's note: The following article was published in the Maine Sunday Telegram and was forwarded to the Vineyard Gazette along with the letter of response. It is reprinted here by permission of the Gazette.*

When the last female heath hen was seen on Martha's Vineyard 68 years ago this week, on Sept. 4, 1929, the fate of this eastern race of the greater prairie chicken probably already was sealed. A bird of undetermined sex was seen on the Green farm at West Tisbury the following year, and the last male was seen and photographed on the Island in 1931. It was spotted again on March 11, 1932, and then – oblivion.

The heath hen, a bird that once had ranged along the Atlantic coastal plain from southern Maine to Virginia, never was seen again.

Today the old Green farm is grown up to the maple, oak and other hardwoods that cover much of the Island. The low thickets and blueberry heaths where the birds once nested, and the dancing or "booming" grounds where the males gathered every spring, may still exist in places, but they are silent now.

A Heath Hen Reservation was established on state forest land in the center of the Island in 1908, but even then it was too late. A brush fire at nesting time in 1916, an unusually harsh winter, a heavy flight of goshawks, inroads by other predators and disease finally took their toll.

Today, old-timers on the Island know the heath hen's story, but few others do. No monument marks the scene of its last stand at what now is the Manuel F. Correllus State Forest; when President Clinton jogged there last week, no one suggested a moment of remembrance for the vanished native.

For the heath hen, there is only oblivion, and the silence of extinction.


### Letter to the Editor

Regarding the article about the now extinct heath hen in the *Maine Sunday Telegram* on August 31, 1997, I can add an interesting footnote. My mother told me how the last heath hen died. While she was alive, she didn't want anyone to know the circumstances, but mom died two years ago, so the tale is safe to tell.

One foggy evening in 1932, mother and her friend, both in their late teens and both born and brought up on Martha's Vineyard, were joyriding in the friend's new car, an early graduation present from her parents, I believe. They were traveling quite slowly due to the poor visibility (a weather phenomenon quite common on Martha's Vineyard), when all of a sudden they saw a blur come out of the woods on the side of the road; then they heard and felt a thump.

They stopped, got out, looked around and found a dead bird lying on the pavement. To their horror they recognized the famous heath hen! They were sure because there had been so much publicity about the last heath hen in the whole world being on Martha's Vineyard. They had seen pictures, descriptions and many articles, and this bird was it.

Now they were the cause of a species becoming extinct. They were so frightened of what they perceived the consequences might be due to this accidental event that after a short and frantic discussion one of them picked up the bird and threw it as far as she could into the woods. They then raced back to the car, hurriedly drove home and never told anyone about it.

Many years later and after her friend had died, my mom told me about this. My mother never was one to make up stories or exaggerate, so I truly believe that whether they really killed the last heath hen or not, mom always believed she and her friend were responsible for that historical demise. 

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