Long-eared Owls

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On Friday night I was in Somerville visiting my friend Soheil, an avid Boston area birder and one of the editors of Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts. He asked me if I would like to go out to Lexington in the morning to see a flock of long-eared owls, and I eagerly answered yes before he told me we would have to get up before five o'clock, since most of the birds would be back on the roost by six. Why, I asked, couldn't we just go out there after it was light and watch them in the trees? But he said that these normally quiet owls "put on quite a display" as they come in to roost - so I assented and said good-night.

I had never seen even one long-eared owl before, let along a "flock" of any kind of owl. Long-ears are occasionally reported on the Cape in winter and, very rarely, may even nest here. They are more regularly seen in small numbers on Nantucket, but in general they are thought to be much less common here than on the mainland. This is probably because their preferred habitat in New England - stands of dense conifers for roosting, near open country, especially river bottoms, for hunting - is in short supply here.

But another problem in determining their status is that long-eared owls are notoriously difficult to detect. They are among the most nocturnal of all birds, very rarely hunting by day and generally returning to their roosts before dawn. They are normally extremely quiet on the roost and camouflage themselves further by perching next to a trunk and compressing the feathers on their already-slender bodies so as to appear as part of the trunk of a dead stub or a branch. The truth is, they may be much more common than we know.

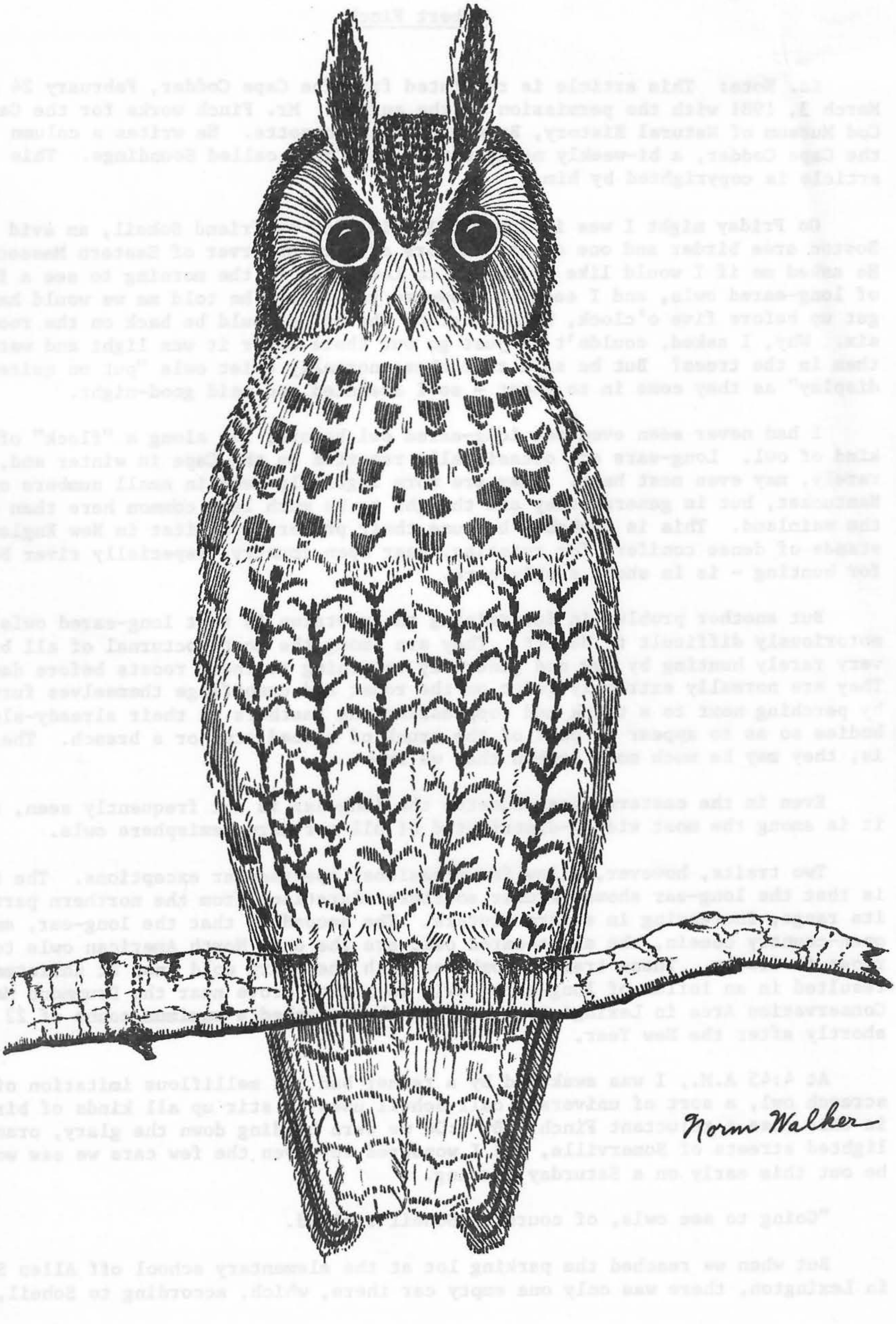
Even in the eastern Massachusetts the long-ear is not frequently seen, though it is among the most widely-distributed of all northern hemisphere owls.

Two traits, however, allow for occasional spectacular exceptions. The first is that the long-ear shows regular southern migrations from the northern part of its range, increasing in severe winters. The second is that the long-ear, and its open-country cousin, the short-eared owl, are the only North American owls to roost in flocks. These traits, combined with the sharp cold snap at Christmas, resulted in an influx of long-eared owls in a pine grove near the Drummond Meadow Conservation Area in Lexington, an influx that reached a maximum count of 22 birds shortly after the New Year.

At 4:45 A.M., I was awakened by a rather bad but melliflous imitation of a screech owl, a sort of universal call Soheil uses to stir up all kinds of birds - in this case a reluctant Finch. By 5:00 we were heading down the glary, orange-lighted streets of Somerville, and I wondered why even the few cars we saw would be out this early on a Saturday morning.

"Going to see owls, of course," Soheil replied.

But when we reached the parking lot at the elementary school off Allen Street in Lexington, there was only one empty car there, which, according to Soheil, had


Norm Walker

been there for weeks. It was still quite dark, or as dark as suburban areas get. We looked across an empty playing field lit sallowly by area lights. At the far edge, where the hill begins to drop off down towards the meadow, rose the dark outline of a dense pine grove. It was a stand of red pines, distinguished by their tall, straight, slender trunks free of limbs for the first thirty feet, which had probably been planted, like the red pine stands on the Cape, back in the 1930's by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Soheil said that one or two long-ears show up in this grove almost every winter, but that an influx the size of this one had not been seen for years. Curiously, when they do show up, long-ears seem to have a preference for the Boston suburbs, rather than more rural areas.

It was in 1874, only a couple of miles from here in Arlington Heights, that the famous Cambridge ornithologist William Brewster encountered a female long-ear defending its nest, and recorded one of the fiercest and most grotesque threat displays in the bird kingdom:

"It seemed to come from a dense growth of cedars in a hollow towards which I had taken only a few steps when the still air was rent by a dozen or more piercing shrieks, given in quick succession, and all alike save that each was a trifle less loud than the one immediately preceding it. Altogether they lasted almost half a minute and suggested the screams of a terror-stricken bird in the clutches of a hawk, but were much louder and more startling. They constituted a fitting prelude to the spectacular appearance, only a second or two later, of their author, a large, female long-eared owl, who suddenly pitched down to the ground about thirty yards away and stood facing me with ruffled plumage and glaring yellow eyes. Her widespread wings were so held that the tips of the outermost primaries touched the carpet of pine needles at her feet and those of the innermost secondaries met over her back, the other quills radiating outward between them. Although, as I have said, she faced me, the outer, not inner surfaces of both wings were shown in my direction. Owing to this singular disposition and inversion of all the flight quills, they formed what appeared to be a large, erect, circular fan of evenly-spaced feathers completely surrounding the head and body of the bird. Standing thus with threatening mien and menacing, swaying movements of the head, she looked like some impish, malformed creature half beside herself with rage."

We got out of the car and walked cautiously across the playing field towards the pine grove, speaking in hushed tones, though it is rather pointless to be "quiet" where owls are concerned. Besides, Soheil asured me, the birds on the roost were "totally oblivious to human beings."

We entered the grove, where the typical cathedral feeling of such stands was emphasized by the straight, planted lines of trunks. Inside the darkness was considerably thicker, but fortunately very little grows beneath red pine, so that we made our way rather easily to three close-set trees where most of the owls usually roosted.

The ground beneath these trees was littered with owl pellets, similar to those of the great-horned owl, regurgitated bits of fur and bone which, Soheil said, the long-ears "plop out at evening", just before they leave the roost.

I could see why the birds might be safely "oblivious" to observers in such a setting. The closest branches were at least 25 feet above our heads on smooth straight trunks. The owls were thought to hunt at night in the open meadows to the north and east below the grove, but were extremely secretive when they came in to the roost, so that in previous visits Soheil and his companions had not managed to spot them before they were in the pines.

We stood quietly, craning our necks upward, and within a few minutes a dark, fluttery shape "appeared" in the top of the middle tree, settling on a branch near the trunk with a soft, rustling of wings like those of a crow. The long-ear, in fact, is about the size of a crow, and, had I not been told otherwise, I would have taken it for an early-rising member of that species.

But after settling in, the owl began to utter a high, soft, sharp twittery sound - ne-ne-ne-ne-ne-ne-ne - unlike anything I had heard before, and certainly not what I might have expected from a member of the owl family. Shortly, however, two more dark shapes materialized in the tops of the pines, several trees over. They, too, settled in, and began answering with that high, quick call, such as a miniature horse might make. It seemed to be a kind of greeting as well as a roosting call, a king of "Hi, fellas, how'd it go tonight?", since, though the owls roost together, they hunt alone. Instead of becoming quiet, however, there then ensued a great deal of jockeying around and shifting of perches among the flock, accompanied by a gentle, taffeta-like noise of wings that is never heard when the birds are in flight. This then, was their "roosting display", a low-key, crepuscular performance that was something like the woodcock's evening ballet in reverse, lovely and quietly impressive.

After the first three owls made their presence known in the tops of the pines above our heads, we waited quietly for another five minutes or so, but no more arrived. Since we could not actually see the birds as they approached the grove in the dim dawn light, it was difficult to tell how many there were, or even whether they had been there before we came.

It was now close to six, and a thin rose wash tinted the sky to the east. Soheil said that most of the birds had probably come in now, but I decided to walk to the eastern edge of the grove on the chance I might catch a straggler or two coming in.

I waited there, as a cock pheasant croaked once down in the meadow and a soft chirping, something like the departed catbird's calls, began down the slope. It was a calm, "warm" morning - about 26 degrees, but even in thermal underwear, I discovered, remaining still doesn't produce much heat. I considered taking a quick lap around the nearby playing field, but then over the tops of the bare maples to the east, a shifting gray form headed toward me. It looked and flew something like a large falcon - an impression given by the long-eared owl's exceptionally long wings, slender body and tail - weaving towards the grove, then circling around at the last minute and entering in from the north.

Soheil joined me, and in the next five minutes two more owls flew in from the east, clearly seen in silhouette weaving and darting from side to side in silent approach. He said it was an unusually late arrival for long-ears. Perhaps they had had particularly good - or else particularly bad - hunting that night.

No more owls arrived after that, and we went back into the grove. Inside it was still quite dark; the birds on the roost had quieted down now and were almost impossible to see. There was not much to do until it became light enough to count them, so, in order to keep warm, we decided to walk down to the meadow below the hill.

The slope was littered with glacial boulders, and I wondered if the hill might in fact be part of a drumlin or esker, glacial deposits common in the Boston Basin area. We passed through a stand of white pines where, according to Soheil, a great horned owl hung out. He wondered whether it might be eating some of the visiting long-ears, thus accounting for their gradually diminishing numbers since the high count of 22 was reported in early January. Though the formidable great horned owl has been known to take other owls, and even red-tailed hawks on occasion, I thought it unlikely it would do so unless driven to extremes of hunger. More probably the moderating weather had caused some of the long-ears to head back north.

Drummond Meadow is a fine, wide field at the bottom of the hill, laced with small streams that make it prime farmland. It is, in fact, used for community gardens by the town of Lexington, as the numerous leaning, weathered tomato stakes testified.

It is also prime owl hunting territory, no doubt filled with field mice and the other "injurious rodents" that the literature says comprise the bulk of the long-ear's diet. Soheil told me that near the coast the long-eared owl replaced the marsh hawk at dusk as the open country hunter of rodents, hunting in much the same way by flying low over dunes and marshes. This kind of shift relief seemed an efficient use of habitat, though from the mice's perspective I thought it somewhat harsh, providing no rest for the meek.

Actually, because of its strictly nocturnal habits, very little is specifically known about the hunting techniques of the long-eared owl, though its diet has been well-established through pellet examination. Soheil, who is a photographer as well as birder, suggested that we might trap one and tie Day-glo ribbons to its legs. Then, mounting a camera with its shutter open overlooking the meadow, we could go home and sleep while the camera recorded the flight and passes of the owl through the night.

I was not sure that Day-glo shone in the dark, but ignoring this and the general improbability of the idea, I pointed out that, like most owls, the long-ear probably takes its prey with its feet. A luminiscent ribbon dangling before a potential meal, I suggested, might impair its hunting efficiency.

Well, then, he countered, we could put a dab of flourescent paint on its back, or even shoot it with some dye on its roost without even having to capture it. But no, it would probably preen off the dye by nightfall, and even if it didn't . . .

We left the mystery of the owl's hunting techniques in the safer hands of future researchers and trudged back up the hill to the red pine grove. It was seven o'clock now, and fully light. The tree tops had become three-dimensional and colored, so that at first the owls were harder to spot than before, since their cryptic plumage now blended in with the limbs and needle clusters.

Long-ears are something of a smaller, more delicate version of the great-horned owl, though their "ears", or head tufts, are longer and set closer together. They also lack the white bib of the larger owl, and the black streakings on the lower breast and underparts are vertical rather than horizontal. Like most owls there is wide variation in color, with the males tending more towards gray and the females, in the elegant vocabulary of ornithologists, more "ochraceous", or yellowish-brown.

Soheil spotted them first, perched not close to the trunks as reputed, but well out on the lower limbs and scattered among several trees. I saw four in one, two in another. They sat utterly immobile, like lovely stone jugs somehow affixed to the branches. The breasts on most appeared a light, buffy grey, streaked with black and, perhaps because of our fore-shortened angle of view from below, large and puffed out. At any rate, try as I might, I could see no sign of their heads. Though I had never heard of such a thing in owls, I wondered if they might roost with their heads tucked into their back feathers.

Once discovered, long-ears are very difficult to flush from their roost, and they did indeed seem, as Soheil had predicted, "totally oblivious" to our presence. The numerous regurgitated owl pellets were visible every where now beneath the trees, similar to but smaller than those of the great-horned's. I broke open a couple of them and found, as expected, the small white bones of mice and voles.

All in all we counted twelve owls, and possibly we missed a few more. Not a spectacular number, but very likely more long-eared owls than I would ever see again.

As we left the grove, I recalled an article I had read recently about red pines, written by a forester at Quabbin Reservoir. Unlike more foresters, this one had a primarily wildlife-oriented view of trees. Red pines, the article stated, are not indigenous to eastern Massachusetts and, because of their lack of undergrowth, are considered a "biological desert" for wildlife. The artificial pine plantations, originally planted in open fields and construction scars at the reservoir, are considered "an aesthetic as well as a utilitarian failure." So the red pine at Quabbin is gradually being clear-cut to return the land to open fields in some areas and to allow natural tree succession to take place in others.

Such an approach pleases the pure environmentalist in me, at least in the abstract. But the morning's visit to this red pine grove in Lexington made it difficult for me to view the trees as either a "failure" or a "desert." Perhaps, like a few houses scattered over an otherwise empty countryside, a little human tinkering with its habitat can sometimes improve things - at least for owls and those who love to watch them.

Common Tern Color-marking by the Canadian Wildlife Service
Request for Information

During 1981, Dr. Hans Blokpoel of the Canadian Wildlife Service color-marked Common Terns at two large colonies in the Great Lakes area, with the objective of determining the year-round distribution of the birds, especially their migration routes and wintering areas in Latin America. Adult Common Terns were trapped on their nests at the Eastern Headland of the Toronto Outer Harbour (Lake Ontario) and at Tower Island (Niagara River). Orange plastic tags were attached to both wings of the trapped adult birds. In addition, young Common Terns were marked with pink plastic wing tags at those colonies. One standard metal leg band and one colored plastic leg band (yellow with a black horizontal stripe) were put on each of the tagged birds.

If you see a Common Tern with a pink or orange wing tag, please record the following details: place, date and color of the tag. If possible, also record the combination of numbers and/or letters on the tag (the two tags on any bird have the same color and the same combination of letters and numbers) and note which legs the plastic and metal leg bands are on. Thank you very much for your assistance. All reports will be acknowledged and should be sent to:

Bird Banding Office
Canadian Wildlife Service
Ottawa, Ontario CANADA
K1A OE7