

THE ENIGMATIC OWL

IT SEEMS OWLS ARE always associated with religion, superstition or ritual. In fact, I recently realized that the owl has been everyone's symbol since the beginning of time. I remembered that the semanticist S.I. Hayakawa got his students to ponder the statement that in the west the owl is a symbol of wisdom, while in the orient, it is a symbol of ignorance. How can this be?

by James Brooks

A symbol of something
or other
to almost everyone
since time began.

Virtually every society associates, personifies or symbolizes owls as something or other, and although we are unclear over exactly what owls mean to us, we are undeniably attracted to these nocturnal creatures.

In ancient Greece, Athena was the goddess of wisdom and Little Owls nested on the Acropolis in Athens. Thus they became associated with the goddess, as their scientific name, *Athene noctua*, indicates. Greek coinage of the time displayed the head of Athena on one side and the likeness of the owl on the other. In Greek pottery, owls were often shown with breasts on vases depicting worship of Athena.

It was in Roman times that the owl became dreaded as an omen of death. Plutarch, however, remarked that the appearance of an owl at the Forum before Caesar's assassination was "not perhaps worth taking notice of in so great a case as this." Shakespeare disagreed in *Julius*

Caesar, as evidenced in this address of Cicero by Casco:

And yesterday the bird of
night did sit
Even at noon-day upon the
market place
Hooting and shrieking.
When these prodigies
Do so conjointly meet, let
not men say
"These are their reasons; they
are natural;"
For, I believe, they are
portentuous things

In MacBeth, the owl once again called out, prefiguring the murder of Duncan. Here Shakespeare fittingly terms the owl, "the obscure bird (who) clamour'd the live-long night."

England was perhaps the ripest place possible for owls to raise up broods of doomsayers. Virtually every castle ruin, each abbey, cloister or country churchyard had appropriate nesting sites, especially for Barn Owls. Country church-

yards contained graveyards, a popular place for owls of any species to hunt and sometimes perch on the taller stones.

Imagine the swain, weary from his day's labors, perhaps tipsy from sparkling cider, ale, or whiskey at the pub, walking home. As he whistles past the graveyard, he hears a human voice. If a full moon is shining, he might even see the calm gaze of human-sized yellow eyes turned upon him, from atop the stone of Squire Western himself. The vocalization is a question in English: "Who? Who? Who?"

Who's going to die? Who next will lie here? You? Well then, who?

A better question might be, why do we associate so many things with owls? What is our attraction to this bird? In his landmark work, *The Naked Ape*, Desmond Morris reports on a survey of favorite animals conducted as part of a children's zoo television program. He concludes that animals favored by humans are those with the most humanoid features. Owls qualify by having rounded outlines, flat faces, facial expressions and vertical postures. They have feathers rather than fur, but they are soft in appearance.

We are also fascinated with the owl's forward-facing eyes, which are the same size as our own. The Iroquois Indian legend cites an impatient owl who wanted the creator Raweno to make him fast, beautiful, and colorful, but he would not stop watching Raweno at work.

"Nobody can forbid me to watch," said the owl. "Nobody can order me to close my eyes. I like watching you, and watch you I will."

The creator grabbed the owl and stuffed its head deep into its body, shaking it until its eyes grew big with fright, and pulled at its ears until they stuck out both sides of its head.



Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) among apple blossoms. This diminutive woodland waif perfectly depicts the forward-facing eyes and round face of nearly all species of owls. Photograph by Alan and Sandy Carey.

"Now you won't be able to crane your neck to watch things you shouldn't. Now you have big ears to listen when someone tells you what not to do. Now you have big eyes, but not so big that you can watch me, because you'll be awake only at night and I work by day."

The Cherokee Indians of east Tennessee had a different explanation. The first fire was sent by the Thunders to the bottom of a hollow sycamore tree on an island. Several animals went to get the fire, and among those who were unsuccessful was the Screech Owl (Wa'huhu'). He looked into the hollow tree and a blast of hot air nearly burned his eyes, which are red to this day.

The hooting owl (U'guku) and the horned owl (Tskili') were nearly blinded by the smoke, and the ashes made white rings around their eyes. But if we are attracted by the owl's humanoid features, why are we also repelled? Mountain folklore today portrays the owl as an object of dread.

Much of Appalachian folklore, like the colorful dialect, goes straight back to Elizabethan times. The owl as an omen of doom goes back to the Romans, and killing the messenger of doom was a remedy then. In Scotland it is even considered bad luck to see an owl in the daytime:

Birds of omen dark and foul,
Night-crow, raven, bat, and owl,
Leave the sick man to his
dream —
All night long he heard your
scream.

Sir Walter Scott, who penned the above, also wrote a ballad sung by the crazed Madge Wildfire as she lay dying in *The Heart of Midlothian*. Here the proud lady fantasizes going to church for her wedding, but she is answered:

'The glow-worm o'er grave and
stone

Shall light thee steady.

The owl from the steeple sing,

"Welcome, proud lady."

Of course, anyone from Scotland would know from such an omen that Madge was going to die.

A happier end for a haughty lady is in the Passamaquoddy Indian tale which portrays the Great Horned Owl as having love medicine and a magic love flute. The haughty girl is lured into the forest by the enchanting music, but rejects the Great Horned Owl as a suitor. Later she hears the music again and is unable

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to resist following. She is carried off by the Great Horned Owl. Eventually she learns to accept that her husband is an owl, because, "Women have to get used to their husbands, no matter who they are." Prior to Shakespeare, English literature had not determined a symbolic association for the owl. The 13th century poem, "The Owl and the Nightingale," is a debate between the two birds over a range of subjects, including wisdom based on experience rather than schooling. Although the gravity of the owl is contrasted with the gaiety of the nightingale, neither bird has any consistent symbolic meaning.

Naturalist Gilbert White published what we would consider to be careful behavioral observations of British owls in 1788, on the eve of the romantic period. It was not just poets who stalked the graveyards at night then. He was one of the first to point out that the Barn

Owl does not hoot like other owls.

The white owl does indeed snore and hiss in a tremendous manner; and these menaces well answer the intention of intimidating; for I have known a whole village up in arms on such an occasion, imagining the church yard to be full of goblins and spectres. White owls also often scream horribly as they fly along; from this screaming probably arose the common people's imaginary species of screech owl, which they superstitiously think attends the windows of dying persons.

Owls thus became a big part of the romantic poetry scene that held sway for the next century with its emphasis on nature and romantic settings, darkness, mystery and ruins.

The model for what became known as the Graveyard School of English romantic poetry was Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard."

Save that from yonder ivy-
mantled tow'r

The moeping owl does to the
moon complain

Of such, as wand'ring near her
secret bow'r,

Molest her ancient solitary reign.

John Keats was a keen observer of both nature and art, and he used the owl to set the scene in "The Eve of St. Agnes." With typical restraint, Keats depicted the owl in realistic, rather than symbolic fashion: "St Agnes Eve — Ah, bitter chill it was!//The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold."

Restraint was not typically the hallmark of romantic literature. Poetry tended to be sentimental. Even the best poets put some maukish work before the public. William Wordsworth immediately comes to mind.

He wrote of a Miss Jewsbury, long confined to her bed by sickness, who derived pleasure from an owl in an uncustomary manner:



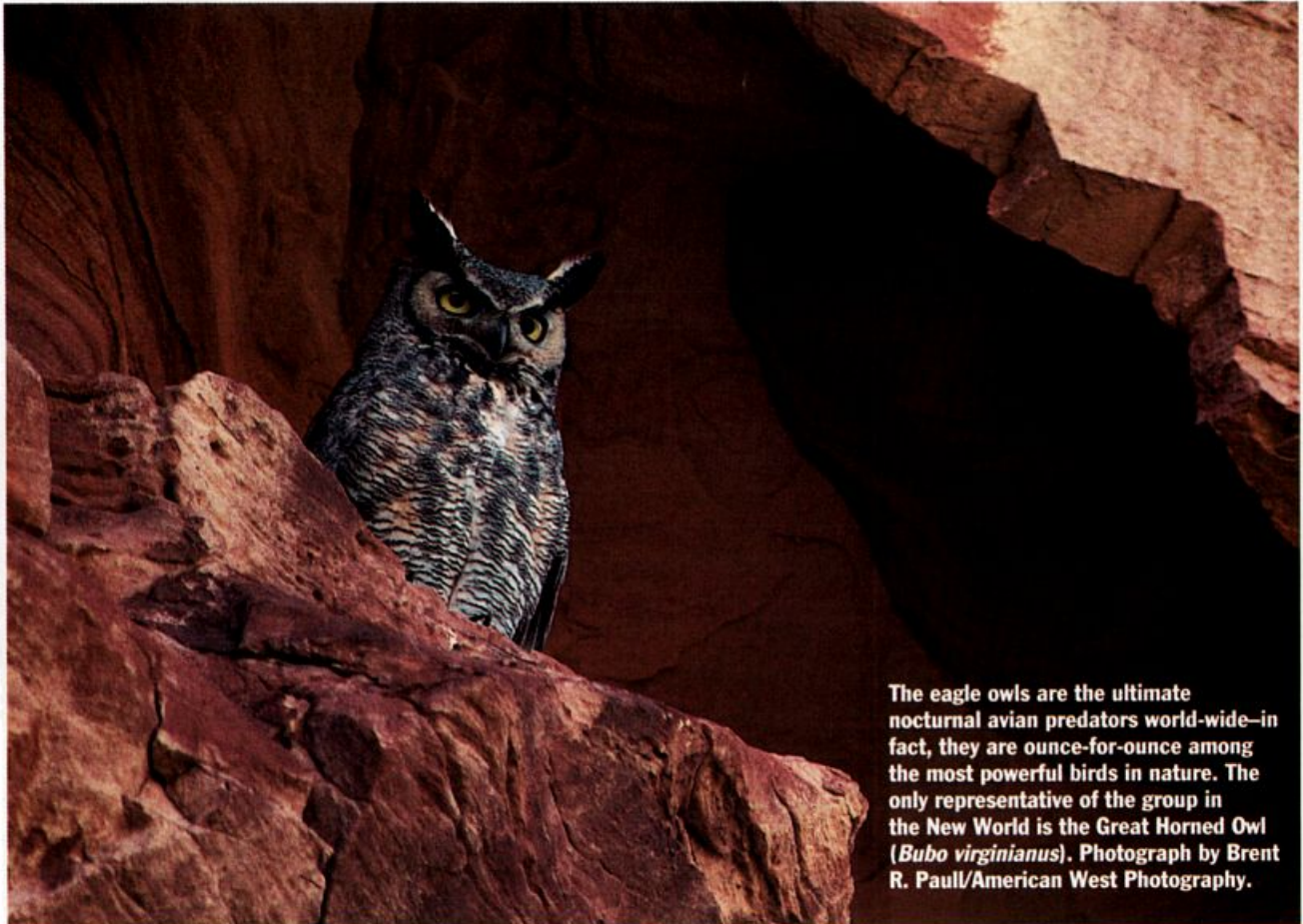
The Eastern Screech-Owl (*Otus asio*), though commonly heard throughout the eastern United States, is often quite difficult to see. Photograph by Stephen Kirkpatrick.



Widespread in forests and wooded swamps across much of North America, the “who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-all” voice of the Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) is familiar to many birders and fisherman alike. Photograph by Tim Daniel.



Taking its scientific name from the Greek goddess of wisdom, the Little Owl (*Athene noctua*) is widespread from southern Great Britain, Europe, and northern Africa across central Asia to China. Photograph by I. Mellinger/VIREO.



The eagle owls are the ultimate nocturnal avian predators world-wide—in fact, they are ounce-for-ounce among the most powerful birds in nature. The only representative of the group in the New World is the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*). Photograph by Brent R. Paul/American West Photography.



Even powerful predators are ungainly when fledging, as this young Great Horned Owl illustrates. Photograph by Anita H. Stewart.

The presence even of a stuffed owl for her
Can cheat the time; sending her fancy out
To ivied castles and to moonlight skies,
Though he can neither stir a plume, nor shout;
Nor veil, with restless film, his staring eyes.

Wordsworth little knew at the time that he had penned the very paragon of romantic excess. *The Stuffed Owl—An Anthology of Bad Verse*, was collected in 1930 by D.B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee. The “Proem” by Lee pays appropriate homage to Wordsworth’s contributions to the literature of overstatement in a world gone trivial:

With fit solemnity let
Wordsworth tell
How Simon’s ankles swell,
and swell, and swell,
And how, from Anna’s
couch when friends depart,
An owl, preserv’d by
taxidermic art,
Can cheat the tedious time, and
heal the conscious smart.

What other folklore has man attached to the owl? In Lithuania the owl brings harm and fire, yet in China homes have an owl corner to protect the building from fire. The Ainu say that the owl can bewitch people by its hoot and must not be imitated. All of us know birders who imitate owls. Are they bewitched?

In Samoa the village, God is said to be incarnate in the owl. The Yao say it is a companion of the witch, and in Thessaly, women use owl feathers as an ingredient of magic. The Navajo Indians use the Screech-Owl as a bugaboo to frighten children. The Kalmuks say the owl saved the life of Ghengis Khan, and demonstrate reverence by wearing its feathers.

The Macusis of British Guiana respect the owl even more by refus-

ing to kill it, because it is said to be familiar of the evil spirit. The Bantu will not touch it because of its association with sorcerers.

As the Forum of Rome had to be purified because an owl perched there, presaging the death of Augustus Caesar, so it is with the Bechuanas, who immediately send for the doctor with his purification ritual if an owl perches on a house.

According to the Talmud, it is unlucky to dream of an owl. In Wales an owl’s hoot signifies the loss of virginity somewhere at that moment.

The Ojibwa dead had to pass over the Owl Bridge to get to the

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other side. Yoruba sorcerers supposedly send the owl out to kill people, but the Pawnees regard the bird as the chief of night who gives aid and protection.

In many cultures owls are nailed to trees or barn doors to avert the ill luck that they bring. But in other cultures, if the owl flies into a dovecot it brings good luck. If its heart and right foot are laid on a sleeping person, he will confess all that he has done.

Still others say that its cry can free a person from fever or that its feathers bring peaceful slumber. Near a pregnant woman among the Wends, the owl presages an easy delivery. In Dalmatia it can forecast the sex of an unborn child.

Every threatened or endangered animal is regarded as an aphrodisiac somewhere in the Orient, and eating owl flesh is said to stimulate

some cultures in India. Of course, eating the eyeballs is also believed to give one the power to see in the dark.

The other side of the coin of Athena is to feed the owl yourself. If one does this in India while naked, one can acquire magical powers.

Arabs feel that a murdered man appears in the form of an owl, and is crying out for expiation. Since expiation by blood is an understood duty in Arab cultures, the appearance of an owl in Tehran triggers much different feelings than in Wessex.

To make sense of any of this melange of folklore and superstition we must first understand that the owl is primarily associated with the night. What could be more mysterious and confusing?

Perhaps no one understood this better than the Polish-born English novelist Joseph Conrad. Crises in Conrad novels occur during times of darkness, fog, or the confusion of storm. Malay canoes pass in the fog, a bomber blows himself up in a London fog, Lord Jim jumps to his doom in the dark and lands in a life boat, Kurtz the trader blunders about his ivory outpost in *The Heart of Darkness*. It is no surprise that *Nostromo* opens with an epigraph from Shakespeare:

so foul a sky
clears not
without a storm

Inability to see, confusion, misunderstanding — these are the products of the night. So is love, and likewise treachery. It is the time of swains and sorcerers, witches and wombats. No other warm blooded creature so perfectly fits into this confusing night-time niche as the owl. ■