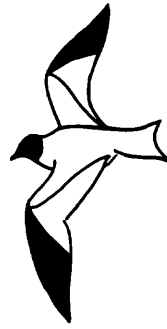


WESTERN BIRDS



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WESTERN BIRD PHOTOGRAPHERS

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This is the second of a series of pictorial essays by western bird photographers. Readers will note that the photographic editor chose himself as the subject for this issue (a useful prerogative). I have been photographing birds and other wildlife subjects for more than 20 years. During this time I have accumulated reasonably good portraits of about 1000 species of birds, of which more than 400 were photographed in North America. Many of my pictures have appeared in books and magazines and the culmination of this effort was reached in March 1974 with the publication of *The Birds of California* (Winchester Press, N. Y.) in which 304 of California's birds are illustrated.

Since July 1942, when House Sparrow became number one on what was to become a ballooning life list, I have been pursuing and watching birds for sheer pleasure and with undiminished zeal. Without this incentive, I doubt that I would have visited those faraway places nor seen the sights it has been my good fortune to have done. Nor would I have met and befriended those people whom I consider to be among the finest in the world—ornithologists, both amateur and professional.

I consider birds to be among the most difficult of photographic subjects to deal with. Most are shy and elusive, in addition to being among the most mobile animals on earth. With senses keener than many other vertebrates and alertness to match, they are most difficult to approach. For this reason, special equipment and techniques must be employed to capture them on film.

Most bird photographers eventually settle upon a standard set of equipment (including telephoto lenses of various focal lengths, electronic flashes, 35 mm single-lens reflex cameras, blinds to hide in, tripods, shoulder-pods, and the other usual paraphernalia of the field nature photographer), but to achieve more than mediocre success requires additional assets not obtainable in the photo store—patience, skill, and a thorough knowledge of the subject. I confess to incomplete mastery of these attributes but will admit to improvement in all of them over the last 20 years.

WESTERN BIRD PHOTOGRAPHERS

I have selected photographs of eight of the 13 species of owls known to occur in California. The set is still incomplete because I have no photographs of one of California's most abundant owls (Screech) nor one of its rarest and shyest (Flammulated). Owls are intriguing yet frustrating birds to study and photograph. Their extraordinary adaptations—cryptic camouflage, immobility, remarkable vision and hearing—and the denseness of the habitats of some, makes everyone's life list of owls rather short. For example, of the 123 typical owls (Strigidae) in the world, I have seen but 31 or about 25%. On the other hand, of the 205 species of Old World vultures, eagles, hawks and kites (Accipitridae), I have seen 119 or 59% and of the 58 Falconidae, I have seen 39 or 67%.

The photograph of the Barn Owl was obtained in the simplest possible way—by merely walking slowly up to it and snapping the shutter a few times. It was really a bit more complicated than that because it involved *stalking*, a useful and often successful technique if the photographer wears clothing of a subdued hue, stalks slowly, moving only when the bird closes its eyes or looks away, and makes no loud noises or quick sudden movements. This owl was sitting adjacent to its cave nest and was about 30 feet away when photographed.

The Great Horned Owl was sitting in a leafless cottonwood near Honey Lake, Lassen County. Great Horned Owls tend to be rather fearless anyway and the biggest problem was obtaining a clear angle of view through the interlocking branches.

We located the nest of the Elf Owl by playing the tape recording of its own voice recorded earlier. It was territorial and my son Brian soon found the nest hole about five feet high in a Desert Willow. It must be one of the very few pairs nesting in California. Brian held a flashlight on the bird while I focused and operated the camera and electronic flash. This bird appeared to have lost its mate in 1974, as we spent several nights trying to locate another bird, but to no avail.

The Pygmy Owl was induced to come into the open by whistling an imitation of its call during the late afternoon in Yosemite Valley. It flew to a nearby fir tree and allowed me to approach to within three feet.

The Spotted Owl photograph was the result of a combined undertaking. We found it roosting high in an Incense Cedar in Icehouse Canyon, San Bernardino County. Conditions for photography were further complicated by the fact that this tree was situated on a steep and rotten slope. A rickety long ladder was located, carried into position and anchored loosely to the tree, and my companion climbed to the topmost rung carrying the electronic flash head. By standing on tiptoe, holding the flash high, and clinging for dear life to the tree trunk, he was able to elevate the flash head high enough for photography.

WESTERN BIRD PHOTOGRAPHERS

In California, Long-eared Owls generally prefer riparian situations. The bird photographed was one of a pair nesting near Arvin, Kern County and was not unduly alarmed at my approach. I suspect that it was the male as the other bird (presumably the female) was incubating on the nearby nest.

The Short-eared Owl photograph was the result of the only good opportunity I have ever had to photograph this bird at close range. Short-eared Owls, being open country birds, are rather more wary than other owls and do not allow a close approach. This bird was located on a post at Upper Newport Bay, Orange County. We elected to approach it slowly by car and by shielding the backside windows with blankets, were able to reduce the appearance of motion within the vehicle, which in effect became a rolling bird blind.

The Great Gray Owl photograph is one of several attempts. This bird (the second state record for Washington) was stalked at the edge of a mountain meadow. Great care was employed as it had flushed too soon on several previous occasions. Now it was at the end of the meadow and another flush would send it into the deep forest. The sunshine on this bird was almost more unusual than the bird itself because these were the last rays of a setting sun, which itself is but rarely viewed in Washington in December. Another time, with another Great Gray Owl, I employed the services of a caged mouse to lure it out of the forest and into photographic position. However, I failed because at the critical moment of kill and consumption I found that I had exhausted my film.

All of the photographs were Kodachrome II originals in color. They were copied onto Kodak Plus-X black and white film and enlargements were made from the negatives.



BARN OWL (*Tyto alba*), Cholame, San Luis Obispo County, California, 9 May 1968;
640 mm lens, 1/125 second at F9.0.



GREAT HORNED OWL (*Bubo virginianus*), Honey Lake, Lassen County, California, 29 December 1970; 500 mm lens, 1/125 second at f4.5.



ELF OWL (*Microathene whitneyi*), Desert Center, Riverside County, California, 20 April 1973; 300 mm lens, electronic flash at f8.0.



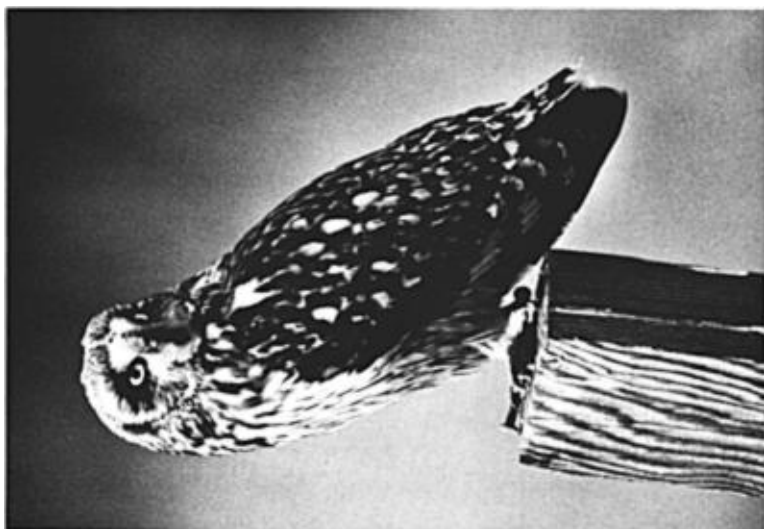
PYGMY OWL (*Glaucidium gnoma*), Yosemite Valley, Mariposa County, California, 16 July 1969; 135 mm lens, electronic flash at f8.0.



SPOTTED OWL (*Strix occidentalis*), Icehouse Canyon, San Bernardino County, California; 500 mm lens, electronic flash at f4.5.



LONG-EARED OWL (*Asio otus*), near Arvin, Kern County, California; 300 mm lens, 1/125 second at f5.6.



SHORT-EARED OWL (*Asio flammeus*), Upper Newport Bay, Orange County, California, 20 March 1972; 1/125 second at f4.5..



GREAT GRAY OWL (*Strix nebulosa*), near Hamilton, Washington, 21 December 1973; 500 mm lens, 1/60 second at f4.5.