

Convergent Turistas II

By Michael Huebschen

The Arctic Tyrant of 2012-2013 might be remembered by some as one that held them hostage for an inordinately long siege of cold, snow and freezing rain while the meristem of the mind longed for phenological flux commensurate with the ideal myth regarding increasing day length. While a certain part of me that has not been impacted by advancing age enjoys a certain amount of the art work of the winter cocoon, by the time that we mark that point in the earth's annual axial tilt oscillation that we have arbitrarily labeled March 15, I am ready for the gradual recession of winter's residuals and the slow processional of vernal splendor. If he could speak English, I might have thanked the Arctic Curmudgeon during his grudging retreat for the surplus of moisture that he left in his wake. Over-and-above the schizoid experience of coping with basement seepage or flooding and sump pump hyperkinesis, one can rejoice in the prospect of gradual replenishment of aquifers, surface waters and wetlands. (While we collectively picked up the pieces for those who suffered great losses from flooding of homes and/or land, we might entertain over the long term, the question: what have we done to those superb natural storage tanks called wetlands, to put the squeeze on drainage basins when a surplus of runoff occurs? What can we do to reverse it?)

I don't know whether he noticed that his 2012-2013 atmospheric antics were paralleled by the winter visitation of many uncommon avian visitors. I did. My proverbial half-glass of water turned to much greater than half full. Snowy Owls, Red and White-winged Crossbills, Pine Grosbeaks, Bohemian Waxwings, Hoary Redpolls, and Townsend's Solitaires, were noted throughout much of the state. Quite a few Boreal Owls were noted in northern Wisconsin. Door County was host to a Northern Hawk Owl for many weeks. Not only did winter avian immigrants converge with one another, but they also converged with we hominid turistas who find great adventure and recreation in visual/auditory communion with these seldom encountered plumed jewels.

By far the greatest larger-than-life biotic treasure that this adventurer encountered was a Great Gray Owl that lingered in Juneau County for at least five weeks after first being documented there on 24 February 2013. (No slight intended to the Townsend's Solitaire, et.al.) Apparently some local folks reported that the bird had been seen hunting in that locale regularly for quite some time prior to the initial documentation. It was probably a juvenile bird. This was my first-ever contact with the Great Gray Strix from the boreal forests of Canada. One cannot be certain that this individual was hatched in Canada. (They are known to nest in the coniferous forests of Canada from Newfoundland to Alaska, and dip down into Northeast Minnesota, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon and as far south as a small, "endangered" population (estimated to number less than 100) in the central Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. There are just a few nesting records from the state of Washington.) As a function of probability, it is quite likely that this bird brought us the gift of its' visit from somewhere in Canada. By way of proximity, however, it may have arrived from as close as northeast Minnesota. Over its' entire range, logging is a suppressor of Great Gray Owl nesting. These large owls generally prefer large tracts of mature coniferous forest, with scattered openings (bogs, fields, etc.) where hunting small

mammals may be optimized. They generally nest in the top of a broken-off bole of a large tree, or in some instances take over a raptor nest from a previous season. In years of small mammal abundance in the best areas of nesting habitat, nesting densities as high as 5 pairs per square mile have been documented. They are reputed to be tolerant of one another in hunting areas, but are fiercely protective of nesting territories against the encroachment of other Great Grays.

It is possible that the seeming "tolerance" of human presence by the Great Gray in Juneau County is part guarded aloofness and part the stubborn inclination to hunt where there had been success before the hominid throng of revelers (this one included) showed up in an otherwise fairly serene locale, despite its' proximity to a well traveled state highway. Isolation from human activity in its' most common native haunts in remote locales may explain its' seeming indifference to human activity. I'm not certain whether the intermittent gabble of hominid onlookers and clicking of camera shutters diminished significantly the bird's ability to hear the activity of potential prey below the snow, when it hunted close to the road. It paid much more intense attention to Bald Eagles and jet planes passing overhead. Whatever the case, during my 7 March visit, I watched the bird make 4 successful catches in a row in the latter part of the afternoon, without a miss! The first of those was perfected in a fence row very near the east road shoulder. The prey looked very much like a Meadow Vole (reputed to comprise as much as 80% of their diet in some of their nesting habitats). The next three captures were orchestrated from the edge of a pine grove about 150 yards east of the road. The last of those involved a glide of about 150 yards from its' pine grove perch, terminating in a plunge below the snow surface that was executed with magnificent competence! If the hearing "radar" of this evolutionary gem be any less than what has been written in the literature and portrayed in video, you could not prove it by this aging observer. (Their tremendous hearing is believed to be augmented by the very large facial disc, which functioned much like a satellite dish long before our own electronic wizards made their version of the design work for signal gathering. The asymmetrical positioning of their ears is believed to further enhance their hearing.) Given my choice, I might well have preferred to experience this initial introduction before having brushed shoulders with the literature and documentaries. Though that be one of the shortcomings of "book learning", I be a far richer fellow for having had these experiences, be the chronology what it may.

On my 13 March visit, a modest group watched/photographed the bird as it perched in a shrub very near the west road shoulder. After quite a few minutes of this, the bird took wing and buzzed about a foot over the head of a young lady to my left before it lit on a road sign just behind her, leaving her in humble awe. I believe that the action had little to do with our presence, since the bird has often been seen hunting from that perch. I had a very similar experience later while standing beneath the sign, as the owl glided in from the west while exhibiting very little concern about this camo-clad behemoth parked below the sign with a podded telephoto rig. As I slowly, quietly created distance between us, I knew that I had been "breathed upon" by a chapter of evolutionary history that I may never see again.

It appeared that hunting had become more difficult due to the rain thaw period that had crusted up the snow cover pretty severely. When I left the area at dusk, the owl was still

waiting in silent vigil atop a fence post not far from the road, presumably hoping to lay ambush on yet one more "worried mouse engineer" (A. Leopold) if only one would stray a bit too close to the surface.

My last summit conference with this noble hunter was a "lifer". On 29 March, I arrived around 9:30 A.M. to find a band of about 10 American Robins working the west road shoulder for morsels of sustenance. The Visiting Strigiform Professor of Aeronautics and Vole Husbandry was not to be seen near the road. Around 11 A.M., it sailed into a small grove of Aspens west of the road and began the methodical move from perch to perch that would last much of the rest of the day. A bit after noon, it began working some of its' perches near the road. It shortly sailed onto a tripod that had been left on the road shoulder by a lady who likes a lot of hand-held shooting. While I was feeding my memory card pixel flow of the bird parked on that tripod, it took wing and lit on the tripod holding my long telephoto rig. Two other women were busy snapping frames of me and the visitor poised about two feet from my very elevated eye brows. I turned toward one of them and posed briefly with his/her honor paying little overt heed to all of the "quiet" whoopla being generated as it towered above my right shoulder. I eased away and documented the baptism of a tripod rig that I had acquired only a week previously with a smaller hand held telephoto rig. I now have a Waverly Gimbal head that with any luck will hold a trace of Great Gray Owl DNA for the duration of those days on which I am priveleged by close communion with the beauty and grace of our native biota.

I saw it make two certain vole captures on that day and several other pounces of uncertain outcome. Hope for refueling for the journey north had been reignited.

Many expressed concern that this bird's indifference to hominid activity might bring it into collision vector with a vehicle. I have no evidence for that finality having been negotiated.

The half-empty glass of water in me turned was overflowing for me during the drive back to the Great Indoors that evening. I have every hope that this particular individual is now back in the "Spruce-Moose" biome to our north, will negotiate a mate, and nurture to flight stage many progeny by the time that my own "hunting perches" have drifted into the twilight.

May you all have this or an equivalent experience before your final migratory flight aboard the planet be completed!