



*Eastern Screech-Owl. (Eric Walters photo)*

ing person, each of us taking a section of the woods and closing in on the pines. We are looking for an owl that has two thin, four-inch tufts appearing at the top of its head and is more slender than the Great Horned Owl.

We search for pellets, regurgitated pieces of bone and fur, which owls can't digest. Finding owl pellets and whitewash is a good sign that owls have been nearby. Someone finds a pellet that looks to be about the right size for a Long-eared Owl. We are excited. We

search for 10 minutes. 15. 20. 30. No sign of Long-eared Owls. An hour gone by, we concede. They're just not here.

Therein lies a good lesson in owl prowling. There's never a guarantee you'll see an owl. We had gotten lucky with the Eastern Screech Owls, even luckier with the Barred Owl. But many owl watchers would agree that prowling for owls is akin to looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

We are disappointed. But we also anticipate a chance to see two other owl species. A nesting pair of Great Horned Owls has been sighted in an oak grove behind a nearby community college. And soon - as dusk approaches - Short-eared Owls will be coming out to begin the hunt in southern Wisconsin.

We arrive at Bong Recreation Area just over the Illinois border at 4:15 p.m. We drive into the park towards an open field area teeming with prairie grasses. We see something fly. We stop our cars and peer out the windows as a Short-eared Owl flies like a huge moth low to the ground, then perches on a post, then undulates back into the field.

Another Short-eared Owl appears, then dive-bombs the other. Still, another swoops swiftly into the ground and out of sight, perhaps picking up a vole that we can't see. Scopes are set up and we get some

good glimpses of the owls as they position themselves on posts, scanning the fields for food.

They are handsome birds, about 15 inches long with boldly streaked breasts and lighter bellies. We can see their long wings with buffy patches and black wrist marks. We watch until the darkness makes it impossible for us to see.

But even as the day fades into night, we continue our search. Our prowl won't end until we find the Great Horned Owl. These magnificent birds with their large, chunky bodies and long tufts mate in January and February. We tiptoe through a frozen field toward the tree where a nest had been sighted. We are careful not to get too close. Nesting owls, especially the Great Horned Owl, do not take kindly to intruders. We squint our eyes to focus on the huge twiggy nest, probably built by a hawk last year.

We scan with our binoculars, chilled by the impending night and also by the thought of seeing the owl. Then, a huge form lifts out of the nest and spreads graceful, giant wings. It flies into the blackness, just as the screech owl had many hours earlier. No doubt, the owl is off on a nighttime hunt. We return home, knowing that while our prowl has finished, another is just beginning. ■