

# Owl Lore

by Judy De Neal

Fog hangs low over the Saline Bottomland and in the cool early dawn, the cornfields and forests meld creating a dreamy appearance where movement seems slowed. The drone of the car's motor and the dim light dulls my senses. Just before an ear-splitting crash, two enormous brown eyes loom out of the fog and stare into mine.

My reverie is shattered.

A Barred Owl, misjudging its altitude, has connected squarely with my windshield. Shaken, yet unaware of the significance of the encounter, I drive on to work, noting only the lifeless form on the roadside. Owl lore, however, dictates that an encounter with an owl is never an accident. Such an event is pregnant with meaning, although the omen itself is subject to interpretation.

Charles Neely, author of *Tales and Songs of Southern Illinois* recorded this story from Lizzie Toler of Carbondale: "When my first husband died, we lived in the country north of Carterville. While he was sick, a hoot-owl came and lit on the steps of the porch. The hooting aroused my husband, and he said to me, 'That's my call.' I didn't ask any questions. He died."

The hoot-owl referred to was the Great Horned Owl. According to tradition, if the hooting owl calls in the yard of a home, a death will occur in the house. If the bird is some distance from the house, the

death might be that of a friend or a more distant relation.

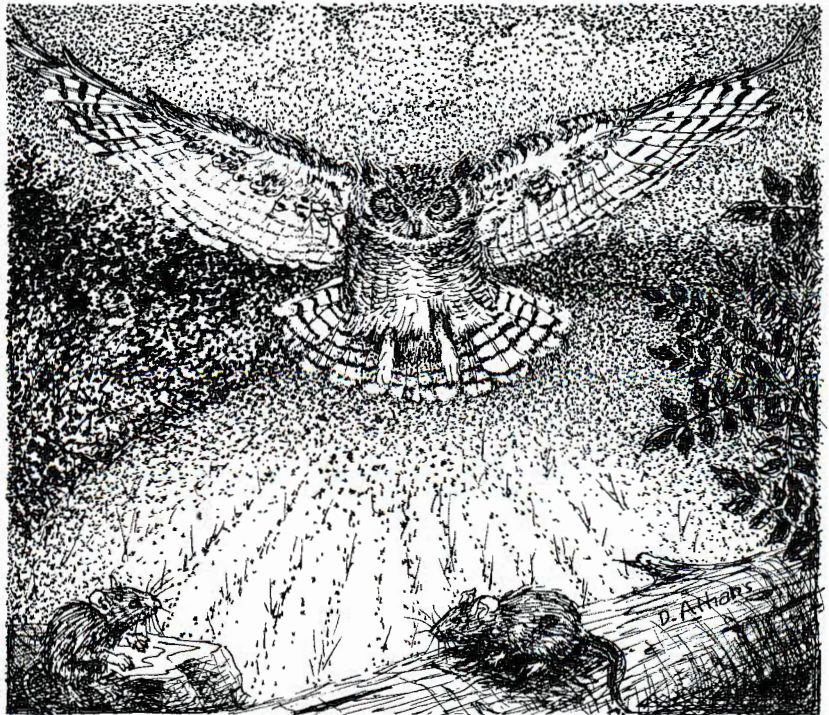
A family might forestall such a tragedy by simply removing the left shoe and turning it upside down or by removing both shoes and setting one cross-wise atop the other, according to John W. Allen in *It Happened in Southern Illinois*. Heating a fireplace shovel in the fire or a hatpin in a kerosene lamp will work, too. Some believed that tying knots in the four corners of a handkerchief would reverse the owl's prophesy.

In southern Illinois, mimicking owl hoots is supposed to bring bad luck. Seminole Indians, however, always whistle back,

because when the owl responds, the whistler knows the hoot is for someone else.

Hooting Great Horned Owls also forecast weather, according to Allen. Daytime hoots in summer predict rain and, if the hoots come from the woods along a creek, the rain will be heavy. In winter, the same hoots foreshadow a cold snap.

Owl lore involves more than hoots. Indeed, owls have been regarded with a mixture of awe and terror through the ages and various superstitions about owls have been passed on for generations in certain cultures. Biblical references consider owls synonymous with desolation (Isaiah 34, 11-15). A



Great Horned Owl drawing by David Athans.