

out Illinois. Owl prowlers often bird before sunrise to sunset in search of these beguiling and mysterious creatures.

Owling can be particularly rewarding before dawn and at dusk when owls are most active. And in winter in certain parts of the state, you can find unusual owls such as the Long-eared, Short-eared, and Snowy Owls which venture south from their summer homes in Minnesota, Canada, and other northern areas to feed and roost in less inclement climes and where food may be more abundant.

It is less inclement for them, but hardly for us, as we have to dress in several layers and wear heavy, warm boots to be prepared for the coldest part of the day just before dawn.

It is at dawn that owls may be completing their hunting and returning to roost in their favored habitat. Although their habitats vary, owls share some unusual characteristics. They have large heads and face masks. Their bills are large and hooked and their long toes have sharp, curved nails used to seize their prey.

#### NOISELESS FLIGHT

A fringe of hair on the wing feathers gives owls the ability to fly almost completely silently as they swoop to catch their prey. That explains why we could not hear a sound when the screech owls flew away.

Owls also possess specialized eyesight that enables them to see remarkably well at night. Because the eye is fixed in the

skull, owls rotate their heads, sometimes up to 270 degrees.

Owls' ears play an important part in helping them catch a meal at night. In several owl species, the ears are asymmetrical; one is located higher than the other helping the owl to locate its prey by sound. A common misbelief is that the horns on owls such as the Great Horned Owl are their ears. But actually, owls' ears are camouflaged slits located on either side of their heads.

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ly haunting calls, which are most often produced at mating time. Some, like the Short-eared and Long-eared Owls, sound like wild dogs barking while others produce "Whoo" calls and whistled shrieks.

The Eastern Screech Owl makes one of the eeriest of calls, vocalizing its wide pitch range by sliding notes from top to bottom, then ending with a fast, repeated trembling pitch, shattering the nighttime silence.

Some owls, such as the screech owl, will respond to

calls played by tape. So, too, will the Barred Owl. We hurry to a nearby woods to search for a Barred Owl. Coaxing the Barred Owl with a tape will be difficult after sunrise.

We trek an arduous mile through the woods, playing the tape at intervals along the way near where the bird was spotted a month ago. We stop occasionally to listen, holding our breath and waiting. Just as we are about to give up, we hear it: a resonant, nasal, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?" the trademark call of the Barred Owl.

By this time, a slice of sun is appearing in the sky. We squint our eyes in the distance as someone spots a form in the trees. The Barred Owl is about 20 inches long with dark eyes and dark barring on the upper breast with dark streaking below. But we can only see its silhouette. As we venture farther, it flies farther away. Not wanting to disturb or provoke this magnificent creature, we stop and listen as its calls grow fainter.

#### THE SEARCH

With the sun now casting its light through the woods, we walk back to our cars. We will search for Long-eared Owls in a nearby conifer stand. At least 12 Long-eared Owls had been observed there at dusk the other day. We walk through the pines, looking for a long slim form sitting on a branch near the tree's trunk about 15 feet high. We comb the place like detectives searching for a miss-