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Published in *The Christian Science Monitor* 11/5/91 and included in my book, *Quiet People in a Noisy World* available for purchase on my website, Oregonauthor.com.

1,462 words.

Owls Trade Observation for Observation

I walked out late last night and looked at the sky, about half clouds and half bright, cold stars. Two owls called back and forth, hoo, hoo-hoo from close, somewhere up behind the shop, and an answer from far off, over by the rock ridge across the meadow, hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, deep tones, with a slight tremolo some of the time. I'm not an expert about owls. I usually have to refer to a book for identification when I hear or see them, but I think I'm hearing great grey owls.

About a week ago, on one of her hikes, Juniper saw an owl flying through the forest. Her description of it, very large, grey, round-headed (without ear-tufts) sounded like a great grey owl, and she picked the great grey picture from the book. Since she saw it, I've been keeping a sharp eye as I walk about the area, hoping to see it. Maybe I will, though I've never seen owls from looking for them but always when I was doing something else and happened upon them.

Years ago, when I did blister-rust control work in the Sierras of northern California, I worked my way through dense whitethorn brush. The last few yards, I had to crawl to get through. When I came out of the brush and stood, I faced a small owl perched on the branch of a fir tree, about four feet from my face. I looked at the owl for a long time. It looked at me just as intensely, undisturbed by my presence. I was thrilled that this small, solemn bird would allow me so close. Eventually, I worked on around the slope away from it.

I have never found an owl quite like it in any of the books I use for identification. It was the right size for a saw-whet owl, about eight inches tall, but its breast was a solid, soft orange color. In my mind, it's filed under, "maybe a saw-whet with color variations I haven't read about or seen in pictures." The identification isn't all that important to me. The experience was, and it will never fade from my memory.

Two years later, I worked through pine and fir forests. I looked up and saw a great grey owl on a pine branch about fifteen feet off the ground, about twenty-five feet ahead of me. I looked at the owl for a

long time. I talked to it. Nothing important, just, “Hey owl. How are you doing?” While I stood there staring, I saw my co-worker above us on the slope, and I called to her to come down. She walked down the side of the ridge and stood beside me, and we both looked at the owl looking at us. The deep yellow eyes do look very wise.

I looked away from the owl to say something to Andrea, and I saw another owl at the foot of the tree. It spread its long wings and flew up and sat beside its companion. We all looked at each other for quite some time. Eventually, Andrea and I decided we needed to get on with our work, and we went on our way. The owls sat on the branch, turned their heads, and watched us leave.

I tracted farmland in the northern Sacramento Valley. A large drainage ditch ran down through the fields, and I often saw a burrowing owl on the bank of that ditch. This small, brown, long-legged owl lived in a hole in the ground, dug by some other animal. It is called a burrowing owl, not because it digs, but because it lives in a burrow dug by another animal. I eventually saw its burrow from a distance. It watched me without fear, even when I shut the tractor off and climbed down from it to eat my lunch. I had no desire to cause it alarm by trying to get closer to it and its burrow.

I drove across eastern Oregon just after dark. I rounded a sharp curve and saw a large snowy owl standing in the middle of the road. I thought I was going to hit it, and I would have happily wrecked the car to miss the magnificent, very large, very white bird, but I actually had plenty of room to stop. The owl stood without moving. I thought the headlights might be blinding it, and I shut them off. The owl gazed into my eyes and I into its for several minutes before it took to wing and flew over the car and away into the night. I thought it was the largest owl I'd ever seen, almost three feet tall.

The book I referred to later, however, said snowy owls are twenty to twenty-seven inches tall, smaller than the great grey owl, so my sense of drama as I looked at the owl may have added to my sense of its size, as it added to my sense of speed and my sense of danger that I might hit the owl. Later editing out everything I might have added into the experience under the influence of awe and excitement still leaves a dramatic encounter that impressed me deeply and left me continuing my night journey at a slow pace, delighted and lost in

thought about all the creatures of the world around me.

I've seen several barn owls. I built a garden in farmland near Vale, Oregon, just south of an abandoned milking shed, which a barn owl used for a daytime roost. I tried to disturb the owl as little as possible, and it did tolerate my activity for more than a month. It kept my garden free of rodents. When it moved, it may have been for reasons other than my close presence. Barn owls are quite tolerant of people. Three barn owls I have known tolerated all sorts of nearby human activity. One who nested in a tree in the yard near Unity, Oregon accepted the residents of the house and all their dogs, cars, tractors, cows, and visitors and seemed to do quite well.

In Whitney Valley, in northeastern Oregon, I saw two great grey owls that reminded me of the two I saw years before in northern California. Just into the edge of the forest from the meadow, two great grey owls sat on a branch and observed me while I observed them from about thirty feet away. They were not alarmed.

Particularly when I write about wildlife, I don't want to impute qualities that are not there, but over the years, again and again, I have the impression the owls I see close at wing know that, though I am human, I will bring them no harm. They know I am curious and thrilled by the opportunity to see them, and they are also curious about me and appreciate the opportunity for close observation.

My reading leads me to believe the great grey owls I saw in Whitney Valley are only occasional visitors there and not usually residents. We did always have owls. All seasons of the year, I heard the nighttime calls, which fit the pattern described by Roger Tory Peterson for great horned owls, resonant hoo, hoo-oo, hoo, hoo (male) or hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo-oo, hoo-oo (female). I saw them many times in the eight and a half years we lived there, but never close, and usually at night, when I saw a dark form flying and wasn't sure if it had the tufts of feathers called horns or not.

Identification of the species adds something to the experience of seeing owls, but not enough that I get frustrated when I don't know for sure what kind of owl I'm seeing. Seeing an owl is a thrill for me, regardless of what species it is.

And please don't try to convince me that the wisdom of owls is another human-created myth. Any wild animal is a wise creature or it

wouldn't have survived this long. A bird who can live as close to our house as this bird lives and almost never be seen is a particularly wise creature.

Every time I walk around, close to the house, or farther away, out through the granite ridges and across the meadow, up into the forest, I watch for wild animals, identifying them when I can, enjoying them even if I can't identify them. If I see one of the owls I've been hearing, it will be an extra large thrill, but seeing it won't be because I've been wise enough to find it and get close. It will be because the owl lets me see it, has the wisdom to know I will do it no harm, and decides to trade observation for observation.