

**A BIG OWL WATCHES THE HAND THAT PORTRAYS HER**

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

While a “grad” and faculty member at Cornell 50 years ago I heard many versions of a charming story about the great bird artist, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and a farmer who was in “downtown Ithaca” for the day and a Great Horned Owl, *Bubo virginianus*, that had been caught red-handed in a henhouse. The owl, very much alive, was on display in Ithaca’s leading hardware store and word had gone round that it was the biggest owl anyone had ever seen in that part of the world.



**GREAT HORNED OWL**

Painting by Debra K. Sharits of Duncan, Oklahoma.

Fuertes, hearing report after report of the monster owl, began to wonder what species it was, so he went to the hardware store for a look. While he was watching the captive through the plate glass a man who was obviously from the country joined him, starting a conversation with "It is a big one, ain't it?" To which Fuertes replied, "Yes, it's big, but not as big as I had expected it to be." The farmer, noting the deprecatory tone of the statement, blurted out: "Well, now, that famous professor at the university — Looie Fewerts is his name, you know who I mean — says it's bigger than any owl he ever seen, and he ought to know." Fuertes, smiling inwardly at hearing himself called famous, and wanting to avoid embarrassing anyone, wound the confrontation up with something like this: "It's a big one, all right, really big."

It's an interesting fact that as a boy in Nebraska, Minnesota, and Oregon I never saw a living great horn in the wilds. In Albert Lano's fine collection of birdskins in Aitkin, Minnesota there were several specimens of the handsome bird, and these I handled with a feeling close to awe. Those curved, steel-hard, needle-sharp claws! My copy of Frank Chapman's "Bird-Life" told me that the great horn lived "only in the wilder, more heavily wooded parts of the country," a statement that didn't help much. Indeed what I knew about great horns could be summed up tersely: they were killers. In Ernest Thompson Seton's "Wild Animals I Have Known," it was a great horn that ended the life of poor Redruff, the "partridge" of the Don Valley. In those days I didn't know that the ruffed grouse, *Bonasa umbellus*, was known as the partridge in some parts of its wide range.

It was in West Virginia, very early one spring, that I came face to face at last with a wild great horn. An inch of snow covered the ground. Near the mouth of Jordan Run, a tributary to Buffalo Creek, I happened upon a ragged old nest — probably a squirrel's — over the edge of which peered down a creature that looked like a cat. I knew at once that it was a great horn. When I started to climb the tree the owl flew off, scattering in all directions the snow that had gathered on its back. There were two eggs, white, almost spherical, incredibly beautiful. What a day to remember! The eggs hatched. The chicks grew larger daily. In due season they fledged, faced with the problem of catching rats, cottontails, and squirrels *on their own*.

In West Virginia someone gave me a young great horn that I raised as a "pet." It was never very tame, but it swallowed great numbers of rats and mice that kids of the neighborhood brought it. I was glad when it became old enough to obtain its own food. I liberated it a long way from town, hoping that I'd never see it again.

As State Ornithologist of Pennsylvania (1924–1929) I saw little of the great horn in the wilds but was deeply interested in examining the stomachs of the scores of owls that were sent to the Game Commission's office for bounty payment. What my assistant, Leo Luttringer, and I found was about what we expected, namely, proof that there was some justification for the great horn's unpopularity. It was, indeed, a destroyer of game and poultry. One owl that I was told about was so persistent in stealing chickens that it was caught twice in steel traps set on fenceposts. Caught the first time, it pulled itself free, trap and all. The following night it was caught again — with a trap on each foot.

Through year after year of dealing with the great horn I never felt the urge to draw one from life. I have often wondered why. Then, at the University of Michigan one day, someone brought in a great horn that had appeal. It was big, beautifully feathered, and docile. After being talked to a bit it submitted to having its feathered toes stroked. It gave up popping its bill unless startled by the slamming of a door. I settled down with pencil, eraser, brushes, and the old Fuertes paintbox, and did a portrait of the owl's head. While I worked my model never looked at my face. What it watched was my right hand. That hand seemed to fascinate it. Its facial expression was at times a bit frightening. What, I thought, if that owl should decide to pounce on one of those fingers? For all I knew they might look like weasels to the owl!

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## THE BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE IN OKLAHOMA

BY MITCHELL OLIPHANT

The Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) is almost circumpolar in distribution, breeding in the Arctic Ocean and the higher latitudes of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans (Harrison, P., 1983, *Seabirds, an identification guide*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, p. 359). Its winter range extends southward in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans to approximately the Tropic of Cancer (*op. cit.*, p. 435). The species is essentially pelagic, and, outside its breeding grounds, is not often recorded over land even in coastal areas, although it "Occurs occasionally in many inland localities, including Great Lakes" (Farrand, J., Jr., 1983, *The Audubon master guide to birding*, Vol. 2, p. 78, Alfred A. Knopf, New York). Thus it is surprising that this ocean-loving gull should show up in Oklahoma, a state lying hundreds of miles from any ocean. Nevertheless, kittiwakes have visited the state 13 times during the last 30 years.

The first sighting in Oklahoma seems to have occurred in Tulsa in 1959. This kittiwake, in first winter feather, was seen by numerous observers, including Anne B. Reynolds, L. Bruce Reynolds and John S. Tomer from 8 to 29 March 1959 at or near Lake Yahola in Mohawk Park (1959, *Aud. Field Notes*, 13:305). It was photographed on 15 March by Jerry Neil and on 18 March by Jack P. Barrett. Five of these photos are on file at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range (Sutton, G. M., [1982], *Species summaries of Oklahoma birds*, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman). Only six months later, another immature Black-legged Kittiwake appeared at Lake Yahola. From 12 October to 7 November 1959, Anne Reynolds, her husband Bruce and possibly others, studied this bird (1960, *Aud. Field Notes*, 14:51). The possibility that this kittiwake was the same bird as was seen the previous spring was rejected by Sutton, who wrote: "had it been the same bird someone surely would have noted it during the summer, for bird students at Tulsa have long been perceptive and active" (Sutton [1982] *op. cit.*). This remarkable year for Black-legged Kittiwake sightings in Oklahoma was capped when J. David Ligon and W. Marvin Davis collected a bird in its first winter plumage on 19 November 1959 below the Lake Overholser dam in Oklahoma City (1960, *Aud. Field Notes*, 14:51).