

# Nocturnal Owl Survey Results 2017

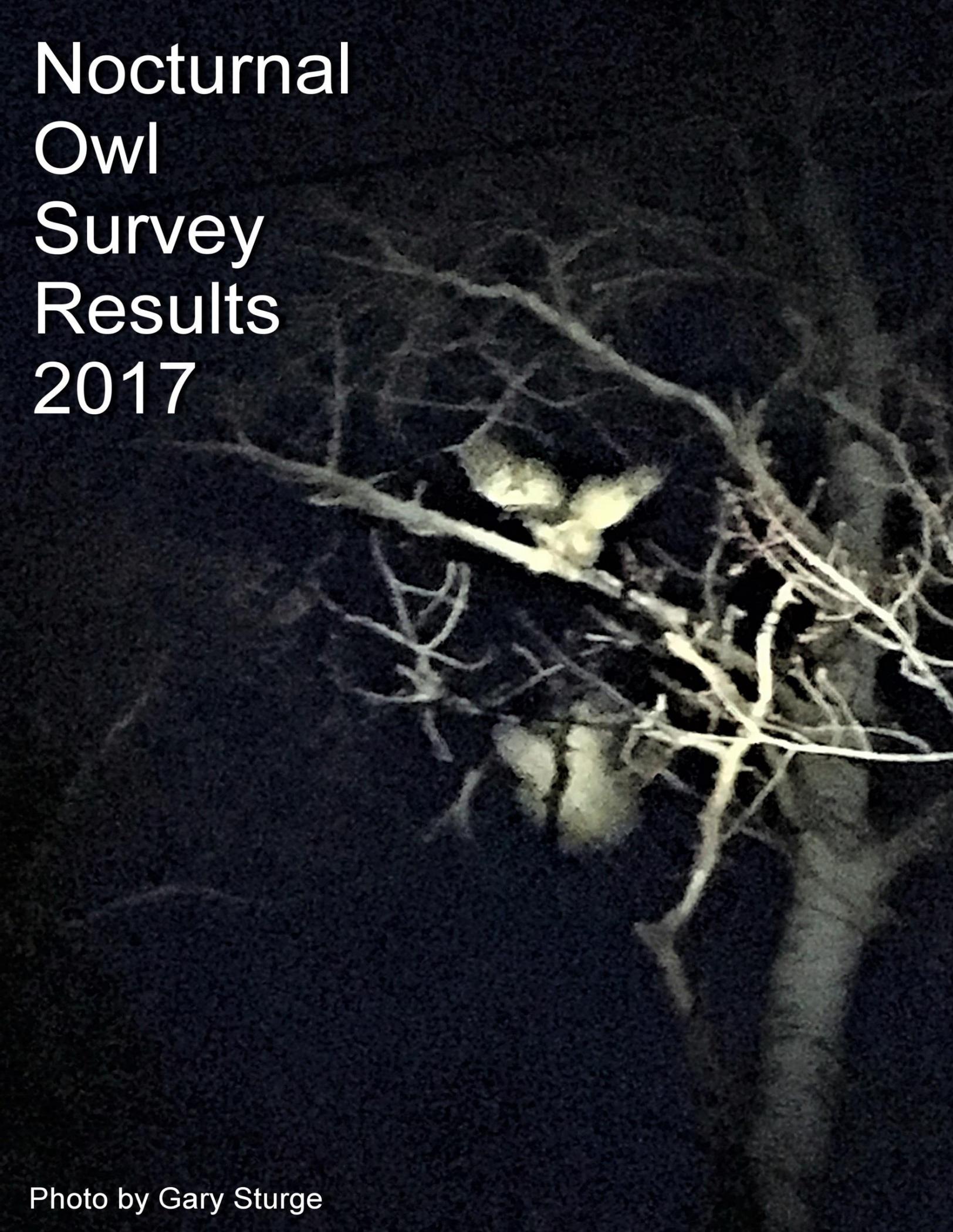


Photo by Gary Sturge

## Nocturnal Owl Survey Summary, April 2017

### And the winner is...

This is the second year for the Nocturnal Owl Survey award. The obvious winners of the 2016 trophy were Lori Anderson and Ken Gowing. But this year it was not quite as easy to pick a winner. All entries, presented in alphabetical order, are well-written with much humour as befits those of us who would even think of spending a cold April's night looking for owls. As Paul Smylie wrote in his article in June's *The Woodland Observer*, "For anyone who feels that time is fleeting, I can promise you that I have found a solution for that: Listening for owls for 12 minutes on the side a dirt road in the dark and cold slows down time, and metabolism."

A couple of other observations, besides the fact we all tend to have a good sense of humour, are that songs and stars figured in a few of the entries. So perhaps we are a unique parliament of humourous, singing, star-gazing owlers!

North Bay is in Central Ontario and the target owl species for the Nocturnal Owl Survey for Central Ontario are Barred and Northern Saw-whet owls.

Dick Tafel and I neither saw nor heard any owls at all, but did hear an American Robin and saw a Common Loon, two Hooded Mergansers and six Ruffed Grouse, but all before the actual survey got underway – and that doesn't count. We also saw the birds of the Big Dipper and heard there was a Great Horned Owl in the area – but that doesn't count either.

Lori Anderson and Ken Gowing also neither saw nor heard any Barred or Northern Saw-whet Owls, but did hear a Great Gray Owl, unfortunately not one of the target species. They also heard an American Bittern and two American Woodcocks, and heard Spring Peepers and a couple of frogs.

Marc Buchanan, Fred Pinto, Paul Smylie and Sarah Wheelan saw two Barred Owls and heard an American Woodcock and fumbled around unsuccessfully trying to get a photograph of the two owls they saw at their very first stop.

April McCrum and Corey Witham saw or heard five Barred Owls and heard one Northern Saw-whet Owl. They also heard a beaver and its unexpected tail-slapping scared the wits out of them.

Gary, Connie and Rachel Sturge on Route 273 saw or heard ten Barred Owls, although one may have been a repeat caller, and one Great Horned Owl which is also not a target species. They also heard a barking dog and some Spring Peepers and saw a shooting star. (*Speaking of songs, I saw a shooting star and thought of you.*)

Garry and Connie Sturge on Route 066 saw or heard five Barred Owls and two Northern Saw-whet Owls. In addition, they heard two American Woodcocks and some Canada Geese. They also had to control fighting dogs and to make a sudden stop when they drove off with the Boom Box still atop their vehicle!

And so who is the winner of the coveted trophy, pictured at right – base made by last year's winner, Ken Gowing?

Gary, Connie and Rachel saw the most Barred Owls, but no Northern Saw-whet Owls. Gary and Connie, without their daughter, are tied with April and Corey for the number of Barred Owls seen or heard, but had one more Northern Saw-whet Owl. But despite the Sturge trio seeing or hearing a large number of Barred Owls and despite possible axe murderers, a loud beaver slap,



fumbling with a headlight and hearing an American Bittern in mid-April, **the trophy goes to Connie and Gary for their surveying of Route 066.** In addition to the number of both target owls seen, they had quite an exciting night what with their dogs acting up and driving off with the Boom Box on top of their vehicle. And Gary got a photo of his singing Dueters unlike the foursome group. (Gary's photo is on the cover.) All this made up for not seeing a charging moose as Gary had hoped to clinch the trophy!

The trophy will be presented at September's Bird Wing meeting.

(Just so you know, there is some controversy about taking photos of owls at night because of the effects of the camera flash and lights/headlights. See: <http://www.audubon.org/news/is-flash-photography-safe-owls>.)

- Renee Levesque, Bird Wing Scribe

## **Graham Lake Route, Lori Anderson and Ken Gowing**

*By Lori Anderson*

On April 18, we once again completed the Nocturnal Owl Survey. We selected the date based on our availability and the weather forecast which promised a perfect night - clear and still. However, the evening of April 18 was not clear and still after all, but cloudy and became slightly windy in the second half of the survey. The results of the survey were not as we predicted. Instead of being responded to by an abundant of owls and hearing numerous species of birds active at night, we heard, largely, nothing!

At stop 1, at the corner of Genesee Road and O'Connor Lane, two American Woodcocks were *peenting*, and we thought the survey was off to a good start despite the absence of the usual Barred Owl!

At stop 2, we heard the highlight of the survey - the vocal response of one single owl, a Great Gray Owl! This was the first Great Gray to respond vocally in all the surveys to date, although we did see a Great Gray on survey night several years ago. Turns out, this was the only owl of the night!

At stop 3, the corner of Genesee and Chiswick, we heard a calling American Bittern. We thought it rather early for this species to have returned. And when we heard two or three Wood Frogs, we optimistically thought the night was just getting started, that we would be soon hearing a parliament of owls and other nighttime species!

As we surveyed the remaining 7 stops - one by one - we heard..... nothing!! Nothing whatsoever, unless one or two frogs, running water, some wind and several cars count for something.

We are still wondering what happened to the owls and other birds that night. Were they absent due to cloud cover? Or blackmailed into silence by the Sturge Group surveying a few nights before? We do know that Rachael Sturge has unparalleled skill and knowledge of bird song and communication. Hmmm.

## **Feronia Route, Marc Buchanan, Fred Pinto, Paul Smylie and Sarah Wheelan**

*By Marc Buchanan*

It was a semi-dark night with a sky full of stars and a full moon shining down brightly like a galleon rocking gently in a sheltered bay when four intrepid owl surveyors, Marc, Fred, Sarah and Paul, set out at dusk on Saturday night, April 1.

Lest the interested reader thinks askance, “Saturday night? what is wrong with them?”, I can assure the reader that “*Saturday night and I ain’t got nobody*” was not playing over the radio, nor the group feeling anything but excitement and anticipation for the journey ahead!

Fortified by tea and coffee from the beloved Tim’s, the four set out accompanied by Orion, Jupiter, and Mr. Moon, discovering at stop one, only passing cars and trucks, and the joy of being under a dazzling sky.

The second stop produced the highlight of the night. There was a loud sudden response to the Barred Owl recording. One Barred Owl responded and then a second and then from both, angry squawks at being disturbed by an “outsider”. A pause, then Marc, “Something flew across the road!” - the shadow clear and distinct over the pavement. “Where?” asked Sarah stepping towards the middle of the road. “Can anybody see it?” “There!” said Sarah, and lo and behold, the shape of a Barred Owl appeared, sitting in a tree, majestically, silently, like the guardian at the entrance of an Egyptian tomb.

Marc and Fred stumbled in the darkness to raise cameras hoping to capture photo proof for any disbelievers. The cry of “how do you get these cameras to work in the dark?” echoed forth. Fred meanwhile attempted to aim his head-mounted spotlight into the tree - no mean feat with the twisting and leaning it took, and for which the team applauded him. Alas, as the light found the bird, it rose and flew off into the darkness, leaving the four intrepids with beating hearts.

The rest of the stops, 3 to 10, resulted in unfulfilled expectations. Yes, the *peent* of the American Woodcock was heard at two separate sites and generated some walking along the verges of the road hoping to glimpse a glance, but to no avail.

In the end, the stimulating company, the identification of constellations (Sarah with her iPhone); learned knowledge ( Paul informing us that Four Mile Hill is the toughest to bike in North Bay); the importance of having the right equipment (Fred’s headlamp to say the least); the beauty of the April moon; and the spiritual conjoining of the group with two Barred Owls made for a Saturday night as good as any that might have been spent at a Saturday night barn social!

## McConnell Lake Road, Dick Tafel and Renee Levesque

*By Renee Levesque*

I know when it comes to surveys that they say no birds (read NO owls) is just as important as many birds (read owls). BUT for those surveyors who stand freezing in the cold of the night, this is hard to believe.

We were far from home on a cold April night on McConnell Lake Road. It was plus-1 when we started the survey, but with an unexpected wind that blew through one like the Wind Maria - pronounced Mariah. (*Maria blows the stars around and sets the clouds a-flyin'. Maria makes the mountains sound like folks was out there dyin'.*) I had on TWO winter coats, a hat, mittens and my Arctic boots and I was still cold. Dick was cold from the get-go and at one point, finally decided he should at the very least put his woollen sweater on underneath his coat!!) We had planned to go earlier in the month, but each and every time, it either rained or there was too much wind or we had other commitments. So we had no choice to go when we did on April 28 because April days were running out.

The ride out was nice. We saw six Ruffed Grouse in total, one displaying for us at the side of Hwy 63 and one displaying at the side of McConnell Lake Road. Those were definite highlights, perhaps the only ones! On McConnell Lake Road, we heard an American Robin, saw a Common Loon in Orient Lake as we do every year and saw two Hooded Mergansers in a pond. We also saw one vehicle and the two people in the vehicle stopped, asking if we needed help. After I was convinced the occupants were not axe murderers, that was exciting because in all these years, it was the first time we ever saw a moving vehicle, let alone have a conversation with its occupants. They told us they hear a Great Horned Owl behind their cottage every night, but I don't think second-hand information counts as an owl sighting.

The sunset was subdued, but pretty, and the waxing crescent of the moon shone brightly. But, much to our surprise, it soon clouded over completely. Later on in the evening, the clouds dissipated somewhat, and we stared in wonder at the constellations and the stars – Mizor, Alcor, Polaris, our bright North Star, and Thuban, another very bright star and interestingly, the North Star between 4000 and 2000 BC. And the constellations - Draco the Dragon, Hercules, and the best-known of all, Ursa Major or the Big Dipper with four of its stars representing the bear and the other three stars representing the hunters. And lest you think I digress from the birds, although I do from the owls, the hunter closest to the bear is a robin; the next, a chickadee; and the next, a moosebird, a very rare bird indeed! From spring to fall these three hunters pursue the bear, but like the coyote in the Roadrunner, never capture it. We were staring way, way into the past, probably even more of an amazing thing than seeing or hearing a Barred Owl or two, although not to diminish that because there is nothing like the call of an owl late in the night.

If there are no owls responding to the calls from atop your vehicle, then in the dark of a very cold late night in the middle of nowhere, you gaze at the other wonders of nature, but kind of wish you were home in a warm bed!

## **Route 400, Restoule, April McCrum and Corey Witham**

*By April McCrum*

This year I decided to try a different nocturnal owl survey route in Restoule, Route # 400. I used to do the owl survey between Martin River and Field, but it was getting more dangerous with all the truck traffic, moose and limited spots to pull over safely. Along with the accompaniment of my husband, Corey Witham, on the drive there we were hopeful but uncertain if we would hear any owls. We reviewed the 10 stops before starting our survey 30 minutes after sunset on Thursday, April 13.

Our first stop was at the closed gated entrance of Restoule Provincial Park. At the beginning of the survey it was 3<sup>0</sup>C with no clouds or wind. As I walked out of the car, within 3 minutes of playing the owl survey CD, a small Barred Owl flew towards the car and landed in a tree about 30m away. Within a few minutes, a different Barred Owl was heard calling and then flew towards the car and landed in the tree with the other Barred Owl. They then both began responding back to the Barred Owl recording that was being played. The one larger owl then landed in the tree above our heads and we were wondering if it was going to land right on the car - which would make for way more of an exciting story! In the past 4 years of doing owl surveys, we had never seen an owl and were so happy that they came so close and were calling together. I thought that would have been our luck for the night.

As the survey continued, we didn't hear any other owls at the next 4 stops. At our 5<sup>th</sup> stop at Commanda Lake, there were some spring peepers calling and a Northern Saw-whet was heard calling in the nearby woods about 300 to 500m away. As I carefully listened to the owl, a beaver decided to let his presence be known by repeatedly splashing his tail, scaring the daylight out of me!

We continued on and the temperature was getting cooler, about -1 degree. At our next stop, we didn't hear any owls but watched the large moon rise above the trees with such beautiful shades of orange. At the second last stop, another Barred Owl was heard far away, likely almost 1km away and at our last stop, what!?, but two more Barred Owls! I wondered if one of them was one we had heard at our last stop. Both owls were calling south across Commanda Lake. At first we heard only one owl. It was quite far away and then we heard the other one calling and it sounded closer. Eventually they came closer and we could hear both more clearly.

I couldn't believe how many owls we heard. What a great night of owling!

## **ROUTE 273, Nipissing Route, Gary, Connie and Rachel Sturge**

*By Gary Sturge*

April 12<sup>th</sup> was a decent day and the evening was clear and 5 C, not a bad start. Daughter Doctor Rachel accompanied us as our secret weapon, and so it started.

**Stop 1** at the end of South River Road near Nipissing. To set the stage, you need to know that I'm as deaf as a post - an owl has to land in a nearby tree and throw a rock at me to get my attention before I hear it. Con is our ears and she is pretty darn good, but Rachel is like a directional microphone. She was the first to hear a pair of dueting Barred Owls (not sure what they were singing); Con was next to hear them; and finally when they flew out to the car (they threw rocks) I heard them. Score 2.

**Stop 2.** Just peepers. (Incidentally, this was about the only place we heard any number of them on both routes.)

**Stop 3.** Right off there was action (at least for the 2 that could hear). Two dueting Barreds made their way towards us. Once they flew out and over us, I heard them too. All the noise started up a 3<sup>rd</sup> Barred from afar who was coming to meet everyone, but this just upset the female already with us. She got very agitated and sounded angry (maybe an old girlfriend of her partner?). This was a good time to leave for the next stop. Score 5.

**Stop 4.** Halfway through the route, from way off, Dr. Super Ears heard a Barred, and because of the direction, it was classified as one of the previous pair and thus a repeater. Score kind of 5 ½, say 6.

**Stop 5.** No action initially until Old Stone Ears standing apart from the others, heard a WU, no not a WHO like Horton and later barking (not a dog), but the defensive call of the Great Horned Owl, verified by the Dr. Score 7. **(Editor's Note: For those WHO may not know, "WHO like Horton" refers to *Horton Hears a Who* by Dr. Seuss.)**

**Stop 6.** Led us in, around and about, to Green Acres Road and there in the dark amongst the tall deciduous trees, we got nothing!

**Stop 7.** Likewise, though we did get a distant dog bark and a shooting star, but they don't count.

**Stop 8.** Virtually at the end of the road near the homes and cottages on McQuaby Lake we did again score, with all present hearing a pair of lovely dueters who came near but not into view. Score 9.

Now this route is a backtracker so you now have to turn around and run back to Wolfe Lake Road where the route continues and so we proceeded on.

**Stop 9.** Here in spite of the running torrent nearby, we finally pulled in a candidate Barred on the 3<sup>rd</sup> call. After thanking him or her, we moved off around Wolfe Lake and approached Alsace Road. Score 10.

**Stop 10.** Just past the swamp at the end of Wolfe Lake, we stopped and tiredly pulled out the boom box and started up. We were very satisfied, a very productive and enjoyable night, but one last Barred flew out to us on the second call to say thanks, good night and have a safe drive home...which we did. Score11

*WHAT A NIGHT!!* 10 Barred Owls and 1 Great Horned Owl.

## **ROUTE 066, Hwy. 533, Mattawa area, Gary and Connie Sturge**

*By Gary Sturge*

Route 66 – not the one running from Chicago to L.A. - is also a wonderful route - no hydro, no Bell, no anything, except mostly poor pavement, running water in the ditches and creeks and TREES. When the sun is truly down and if the night is cloudy, it is DARK!

We were to have friends from Mississauga accompany us, but at the last minute (due to a kidney stone?) they cancelled and we were *On Our Own Again, Naturally*. We arrived at **Stop 1** on April 14 twelve minutes before launch and immediately were treated to a calling Barred Owl who persisted until the survey started!! He started by first calling to the SE of us. He then moved northward and stopped calling. We prayed - or maybe I cursed - and whatever it was, it did the trick and in the first minute of the recording, from the north of us, he started up again. He took a rest through minute 2 and the Boreal Owl call, but resumed, carrying on to the end. He did decline our invitation to visit us (like our Mississauga friends) and stayed nearby in the trees. SCORE 1

We arrived at **Stop 2** and were immediately greeted by a *peenting* American Woodcock. Although things were looking good, after the elation of a score at Stop 1, we were experiencing some owl disappointment until a little fellow south of us piped up after the 4<sup>th</sup> Barred Owl call. It was a Northern Saw-whet who continued while we packed up and left him. SCORE 2, as well as an American Woodcock!

Oh Boy!! It's going to be another *One of These Nights*, lots of entertainment! And so it was at **Stop 3** as we set up the Boom Box on top of the car to the accompaniment of another Northern Saw-whet east of us. Perhaps the first guy called his friend or more likely tweeted him. After the Boreal Owl recorded call, things quieted down until the 3<sup>rd</sup> Barred owl call when owl hell broke out!! The Saw-whet resumed and was immediately joined in song by a pair of dueting Barreds NW of us, heard by Con. I was south of the car and heard -yes, me Stone Ears - a Barred of my own to the south. We now had a Quartet!! What a racket!!! And then to add to the excitement, the Dueters flew out to meet us. They all continued calling as we again said adieu and headed out *On the Road Again*. SCORE 6

**Stop 4** and panic set in. Get the dogs settled –yes, they like to do the owl survey too – and get out the Boom Box, the flashlights, the clipboard, compass and the pen. But where's the pen? I only brought one, thought the car had some, it always does, we're about to play the Boreal Owl recording and no pen! AAHHHHH!!

Have you looked in there? (Help is not help when it's right!) Thank goodness there's a pen and it works. But, after all this, no owl action, just some distant geese.

Up the road to **Stop 5**, and yes right on queue on the first Barred Owl call, we got a reply. He never came close or moved from his position, but hey it still counts!! SCORE 7

Half way done and 7 owls, what a pace!

Now the second half of this route has never proved as productive for owls as the first and it wasn't about to change this year, apparently. **Stop 6** just lots of noisy running water, but at **Stop 7** things again erupted.

Now our dogs, Gus and Abi (new addition), took a little while to get to know each other but are now great friends (right!??). Well last couple of weeks, Gus has been somewhat antisocial. We make sure she is getting lots of attention and cookies, but she and Abi still go at it occasionally like...dogs. Well Abi was riding assistant shot gun all night and Gus from her distant back seat seemed to take offense....it's now my turn! They got into it between the bucket seats mid-way through the owl calls and I had to immediately play the referee and using tough measures told them in no uncertain terms: *Get to your corner and stay there or else not another*

*cookie tonight!* Good thing Con the Ear was still on duty, but alas, no owls. The “Everyone Settle Down or Else” negotiations consumed several minutes and that put us behind a little, so we jumped in the car and rushed off.

I recall that it was at about 1.1 km up the road when it hit me. I had forgotten to take the boom box from the car roof and we were hustling along at about 40 miles an hour!! STOP slowly! I jump out of the car and find the boom box is still there sitting on its towel with the tape hissing away as it does at the end of the recording. I recovered it and off we hustled. *Dogs, you can still live with us, the survey has not been aborted after all!*

**Stops 8, 9 & 10.** Well as you can guess the owling gods were not amused at the proceedings and granted us only a lowly American Woodcock at Stop 9, and no more owls for the night.

Well hey a Score of 5 Barred Owls, 2 Northern Saw-whets and 2 American Woodcocks is nothing to sneeze at. We packed up and started the 1 ½ hour drive home arriving there around 1:00 a.m. We were all exhausted and even the dogs said good night to each other as we turned off the lights!