

Nocturnal Owl Survey, 2019



**The owl is
the symbol of
wisdom and
learning.**

Nocturnal Owl Survey 2019

And the winner of the coveted trophy is...

By Renee Levesque, Judge and Bird Wing Scribe

Once again this year, I received well-written and entertaining Nocturnal Owl Survey reports. It would seem that when owlers are out in the dark late at night up until, and even after, the bewitching hour, and frequently in the wilderness or near-wilderness, some sort of adventure is bound to happen. And this year did not disappoint.

There were only four teams in contention for the annual Nocturnal Owl Survey trophy (right) this year. The Doug Pattersons now live in Nova Scotia, so a bit far for them to come to do their Mattawa route; April McCrum was not able to do her planned Restoule route because she was busy with work; and although Lori Anderson and Ken Gowing, winners of the 2017 trophy, did do a survey, Lori was not able to get a report submitted. Farming in the spring and summer takes up a lot of her time. Reports submitted this year are those of former two-time winners, Gary, Connie and Rachel Sturge, with Nada Cortes as the fourth person; Marc Buchanan with Louise Simpson, Sarah Wheelan and Grant McKercher; Oriana Pokorny with Sarah Wheelan; and Dick Tafel with Jim Hasler and Lori Beckerton. It can be hard enough doing this survey once, never mind twice, so kudos to Sarah.



Ken Gowing

It was a difficult April because of all the snow we had over the winter and continuing cold temperatures and a lot of rain in April and May. The weather plays a predominant role in all the reports. If you were here to experience our winter and spring, how could it not be.

Gary, Connie, Rachel and Nada were first off the block, undertaking their survey in the Powassan area on April 21. Understandably, Matt Procnier, who with his family was on

evacuation watch because of the rising South River, could not take part this year. Matt had been elevated to sophomore status by Gary after being the newbie for the first two years he did the survey. But Gary seems to need a newbie to get a good number of owls, so taking Matt's place was newbie Nada Cortes all the way up from Ithaca, New York. Without a newbie, who knows what might have happened.

Right off the start, Nada did not disappoint. The team got two dueting Barred Owls at their very first stop! Talk about luck, having a newbie or more likely the right route. And two stops later, three owls!!! And that was only the beginning.

Lest you think Gary and gang are focused solely on owls, in between all their owls, they had an adventure with a barking dog and an irate homeowner; experienced two major wash-outs on Wolf Lake Road; had time to admire the lights of Callander and North Bay reflected in the clouds; had time to watch the moon rising over a swamp; and had time for some humour reminiscent of Abbot and Costello's *Who's On First*. The Abbot and Costello routine may be indicative of Gary's age, as is his reference to the TV show, *Green Acres*: "Green acres is the place to be; farm livin' is the life for me; land spreadin' out so far and wide; keep Manhattan, just give me that countryside."

In total Gary and gang heard a Wilson's Snipe and 10 Barred Owls, eight of which they saw!!!

Next out of the gate was Marc Buchanan's team, surveying the Four Mile Lake Road area. Marc's report is short and sweet, but consisting of quite a descriptive sentence or two. For example, Marc writes that their survey route was holding "onto the cold as if it hated the thought of warm spring breezes and the coming of black flies and mosquitos."

Marc's focus in his report was more on the weather than on the owls seen or heard. That may be because they heard only one Barred Owl. They also heard a couple of Boreal Owls which would be significant if they heard them at official stops, but from Marc's report it would seem this wasn't the case because he says they heard them "along the way".

The group had some interesting discussions, one of which was about the "ladies of the stars". I am assuming Marc is referring to female constellations, like Andromeda and Cassiopeia, to name a couple.

Then, with only one April day left to spare, Oriana and Sarah set out in Oriana's jeep, and thank goodness for that or they might not have been able to access their last stop because of a major wash-out. But Oriana's jeep loves puddles, the bigger, the better.

On their way to Stop 1, they saw a Bald Eagle, an American Woodcock and a Ruffed Grouse, to say nothing of a "gaggle of fisher people" supposedly out smelting.

Things were pretty slow in the owl department for them until Stop 7, but before they got there, they had quite an exciting adventure when one of the lights in the jeep would not go out, not

even when the jeep was turned off. What would happen to them deep in the woods on a washed-out logging road without cell service if the battery went dead?

There was talk of abandoning the survey, but with only one day left in April, Oriana was determined to fix the problem and with much “MacGyvering”, meaning repair by improvising, she and Sarah were able to remove the fuse, but in so doing, left themselves without any interior lights.

With all this, these two intrepid owlers deserved to see an owl or two and they did at Stop 7 when they heard two Barred Owls, one of which they saw fly into a nearby tree. No other owls were seen or heard for the rest of the survey, but it didn’t matter to them because they had the excitement of seeing and hearing two owls.

Now we come to Dick, Jim and Lori. While everyone else surveyed their route in April, Dick was not able to survey his route until May 2, two days after the deadline, although it seems this was accepted by Bird Studies Canada. Dick says in his report that he had a special duty with his wife, Elsa, on April 29, finally a good weather day, and on April 30, also a good weather day, he says he was too tired to survey. I wondered, as I am sure you all will, just what sort of duty he had to perform with his wife that left him too tired the next day! Undoubtedly the best line in all the reports and the best excuse ever.

To be fair, the McConnell Lake is further away from North Bay than the other routes and having done this route a few times, I have not seen it without snow even in good Aprils. Also to be fair, Dick is considered a Silver Owl having done this exact same route for 25 years! It is a route which hasn’t yielded much in the way of owls over the last few years, although Dick reports that more owls were seen and heard along this road in past years.

Dick’s group started out extremely well, seeing a moose on their way. The first year we had a trophy, the year Lori and Ken won, I told Gary that if he could only see a moose he might stand a chance of winning! So no wonder Dick considered the moose a good omen – and it might have been, but then on their way to their first stop, they saw a drunken, wobbly Ruffed Grouse and that in retrospect may have been a bad omen.

The group saw nothing until Stop 5 when they heard a Barred Owl and saw another. Until that time, not a sound from anything was heard since they began their survey. So you can imagine how excited the group was at finally hearing and seeing something, anything, especially two Barred Owls. For those who have never done an owl survey, it is truly exciting hearing an owl, just as all the groups report. It wakes you up. It makes you feel it is worthwhile being out in the dark and cold, in the deep snow-covered forest in Dick’s case, way past your bedtime.

But that was the last excitement this group had. The rain, that had not been predicted, began lightly enough at Stop 5, but then came down harder and harder, and so the group had to abandon

the survey. Even during the courtship period, birds stop calling at night in heavy rain and owls' feathers are not very waterproof, so hunting in the rain is difficult for them.

And the winner is: Well, yet again for the third consecutive year it has to be Gary's team. How could it not be? They heard 10 Barred Owls, 8 of which they saw, and Gary did write a good and thorough report. So given the fact that all reports were entertaining and well-written, the decision had to be based on the number of owls seen. Presentation of the trophy will take place at the Bird Wing meeting on September 24.



Gary Chowns

Nocturnal Owl Survey

April 21

Powassan area

By Gary Sturge

Well that time of the year rolled around and in keeping with the miserable winter we had, the spring seemed no better. Snow cover in the bush was still extensive and the weather was wet and cold throughout April. As we neared the end of the month, Connie and I grew concerned about the date of the survey. Easter weekend came and lo and behold the weather for Easter Sunday was looking good.

But there was a downside. With all the flooding this spring on the South River, Matt Procunier, our intrepid sophomore surveyor, was flooded and on the Sunday in danger of having to evacuate his home. Understandably, he could not participate. Given we were running out of April and the future weather forecast looked dismal, we decided we had to survey regardless. Now this year, like last, our daughter, Rachel “the Ears”, joined us. Taking Matt’s place was Rachel’s best friend, Nada Cortes, who had come up from Ithaca, New York, to join us for Easter. So we were a party of four and as in the preceding 3 years on this route, we had a newbie with us. Beginner’s luck again, we hoped.

We determined timing, collected our gear, jumped into our vehicles and headed off to Stop 1 on South River Road. With lots of melt in the bush and high water in the raging river, it was wet and muddy when we exited the vehicles. Oh well, owls don’t walk around much, so mud would not be an issue. We set up the boom box and after the 3rd call, out came a dueting pair of Barred Owls. They flew over us and sat watching us until we finally packed up and left. Hey great - we’re not going to get skunked this year and it is only Stop 1!!!

Down the road we bumped, trying to miss the potholes. At Stop 2, we patiently called and listened, but only heard water running in the ditches and river.



Matt Procunier

Off to Stop 3, near a house, a bridge, a river and Hwy 534. We set up in our customary spot, trying to avoid everything except owls. We called once and got a reply or rather replies. "I have one over here," I said. "Well there's one here too." (Rachel and Nada) "Well yours is also here now." "Oh OK, so that's 2 then." "But I saw one fly quietly back across the road." "Well then, they are both over here." "But now there's also one here on the other side". Our confusion and dialogue reminded me of the Abbott and Costello's routine *Who's on First?* At about this time, the homeowner, 300 or 400 feet away and in the bush, let his dog out and the woofing began. At that moment another owl call went off and the homeowner started up his car alarm. Then all 3 owls moved or called together and it was determined unanimously that we had 3 Barred Owls, a dog, a disturbed homeowner and an alarming car.....and so we left rapidly.

Not bad, 3 stops and 5 owls. Looking good. Nada's beginner's luck was holding!

Now up King Road to stop 4. A dark road surrounded by tall trees, and tonight running water in the ditches. We called prodigiously, but to no avail. Looking down the road through the trees, we saw the distant lights of Callander and North Bay reflected off the low dark clouds. But no owls. So onto Stop 5.

Stop 5 is further along the same road nearing Wolf Lake Road, again surrounded by dark trees. Setting up, I noticed the sky overhead was clear and stars were showing. Maybe a good omen! Just as it started up, the CD player gave a cough and from experience we knew it was hungry for more power, so we hustled to satisfy its immense appetite for D sized batteries. We started the CD again and after 2 Barred calls, a pair of Barred Owls responded and flew out and around us looking for the intruder. The charade continued till the end of call 4. We said goodbye and left for Green Acres Road.

Stops 6 to 8 are on Green Acres Road, but this tree-embraced road is not at all like the old TV show and I have often wondered how the road got its name. No responses at this stop.

Stop 7. This stop is near the end of a swamp on the side of the road. We set up and started calling and after a short while we got buzzed by a fast-flying bird. When it landed somewhere in the swamp, we heard it call. It was a Wilson's Snipe (below).



Renee Levesque

After a few calls, all remained quiet, but then on the 4th Barred call, we had an owl response. Two Barred Owls were distant but approaching us. We listened for a few moments, but then the CD grunted and so we packed and set off for Stop 8.

Stop 8 is near the end of the road on McQuaby Lake. There are several homes and large cottages here and so the challenge is not to disturb anyone, especially now that it was closing on 11:00 p.m. We've never been disappointed here and were not to be this year. After the 4th Barred call, out came a Barred Owl which silently perched in the same tree as last year, maybe even the same owl. We took a photo, thanked him or her, said we'd see it next year and left. (Photo from last year at top of the first page.) We back-tracked to Wolf Lake Road and then off we went to Stop 9.

Stop 9 is on a small hill with a nearby creek and a waterfall, so it is a noisy stop, but not noisy with owl calls.

So on to Stop 10, the finale, located near the end of Wolf Lake Road, a few hundred feet from Alsace Road. To get there, you drive by Wolf Lake and through the swamp located at the end. Knowing the water was high, we were not surprised when we got past the beach location to see the road flooded. This section was only about 100 feet long and because it was only the lake water and not water from a flowing stream, I decided we should drive through it. A little further on, we got to the swamp area and here the road was again flooded, but for a distance of over 300 feet. This left us about 400 feet short of our stop, but as there was no alternative, we set up.

The moon was rising while we waited through the tape and showed itself briefly as it rose over the swamp before disappearing behind the low-layered clouds. All remained quiet. When time was up, we carefully backed the vehicles a good distance in the dark before we could get turned around.

The final tally was **10 Barred Owls, 8 seen and 1 photographed, and one Wilson's Snipe**. A good result. Our newbie Nada was thrilled.

Nocturnal Owl Survey

April 27

Four Mile Lake Road and area

By Marc Buchanan

Why do we pick a Saturday night? Well perhaps it is a rebellious gesture against all those hockey fans who believe watching the Leafs or the Habs is the only activity to be done on a Saturday night; or perhaps owls play harder and are more active on the weekend; or we all just needed to get out of the house. No matter, Sarah Wheelan, Grant McKercher, Louise Simpson and I once again took on the intrepid task of the Four Mile Lake Road route – a route, it has to be said, that gives more null data than empirical.

April is still a cold month, particularly the evenings, and for some climometric reason the Four Mile Lake area holds onto the cold as if it hated the thought of warm spring breezes and the coming of black flies and mosquitos.

And so the group bulked up in wintry jackets, gloves, and, yes, some even touqued up. Sarah, planning ahead and cognizant of climate history, purchased foot warmers for all of us to stave off the potential of frostbite and chilblains. Thank you, Sarah!

While the time passed quickly (!?) or perhaps slowly but quickly – are we finished yet? – our auditory and visual faculties never stopped in anticipation of hearing or seeing the birds of the night. In between the sighting of a Barred Owl at Stop 2, and hearing a couple of Boreal Owls (above right) along the way, our shared information on unruly dogs and loving cats and discussions of ladies in the stars (this year not seen due to cloudy conditions), we had a lovely time and look forward to next year.



Lloyd Sparks

Nocturnal Owl Survey

April 30

Sand Dam Road

By Oriana Pokorny and Sarah Wheelan

Sand Dam Road is an unpredictable route. Flooding and unplowed access are both annual concerns, which is why the owl route had been un-surveyed for the past decade until Oriana picked it up last year. To successfully complete the survey, the team leader needs to do an exploratory run to check the road conditions.

This year, we pushed it to the very edge of our time limit – the last day of April – to ensure the road would be passable. The winter had been so effective at accumulating snow that most of the route was still impassable halfway into April. Luckily a string of warm weather, followed by a string of rainy weather, cleared out most of the snow. Still, the road was soggy with snowmelt. There were a few easily passable washouts, but one that gave us concern. It was a deep gouge about two feet wide between the two furthest stops. Would we be able to make it if we took a Jeep? The last survey point was a walkable distance away, but could we meet the survey time requirements if we hiked that stretch?

Well, Oriana has a Jeep and puddles are fun, and with it we made it through!



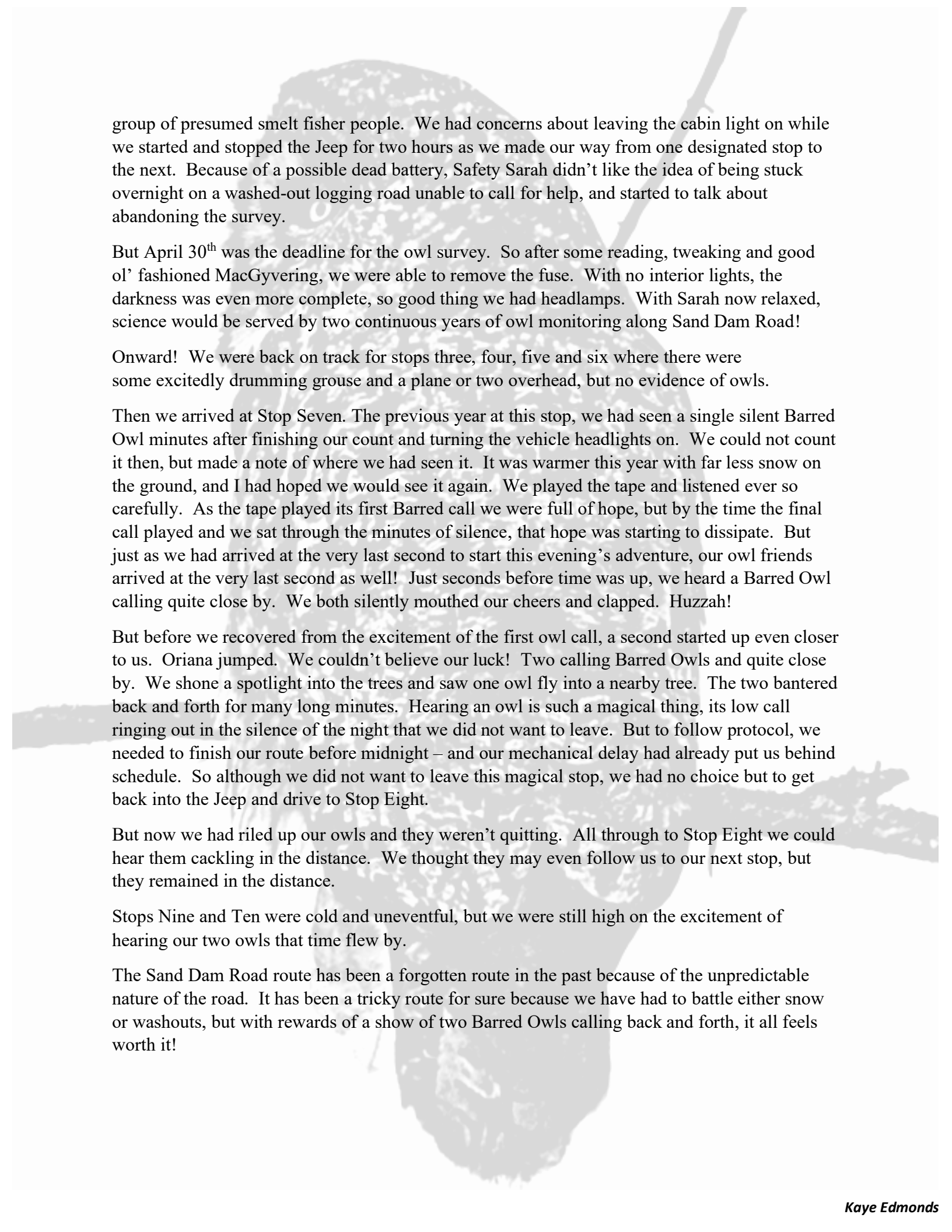
Renee Levesque

Before we even got to our starting marker, we were stopping to watch birds. We spotted a Bald Eagle, an American Woodcock (left) and a Ruffed Grouse on our drive out. We also passed a gaggle of people who we assumed were on a smelt hunt. The banks of the biggest washout had rounded enough that we crossed easily in the Jeep. We were cutting it close on time, but reached the first stop just before our designated start time.

Stops one and two were noisy with frogs and grouse, but no owls.

And then the light came on. Or rather, it wouldn't shut off. A switch inside the passenger side door stopped working so that when the door was

closed, the interior cabin light remained on – even when we turned the Jeep off! We were deep in the woods without cell service on a washed-out logging road, more than 10 kilometres past the



group of presumed smelt fisher people. We had concerns about leaving the cabin light on while we started and stopped the Jeep for two hours as we made our way from one designated stop to the next. Because of a possible dead battery, Safety Sarah didn't like the idea of being stuck overnight on a washed-out logging road unable to call for help, and started to talk about abandoning the survey.

But April 30th was the deadline for the owl survey. So after some reading, tweaking and good ol' fashioned MacGyvering, we were able to remove the fuse. With no interior lights, the darkness was even more complete, so good thing we had headlamps. With Sarah now relaxed, science would be served by two continuous years of owl monitoring along Sand Dam Road!

Onward! We were back on track for stops three, four, five and six where there were some excitedly drumming grouse and a plane or two overhead, but no evidence of owls.

Then we arrived at Stop Seven. The previous year at this stop, we had seen a single silent Barred Owl minutes after finishing our count and turning the vehicle headlights on. We could not count it then, but made a note of where we had seen it. It was warmer this year with far less snow on the ground, and I had hoped we would see it again. We played the tape and listened ever so carefully. As the tape played its first Barred call we were full of hope, but by the time the final call played and we sat through the minutes of silence, that hope was starting to dissipate. But just as we had arrived at the very last second to start this evening's adventure, our owl friends arrived at the very last second as well! Just seconds before time was up, we heard a Barred Owl calling quite close by. We both silently mouthed our cheers and clapped. Huzzah!

But before we recovered from the excitement of the first owl call, a second started up even closer to us. Oriana jumped. We couldn't believe our luck! Two calling Barred Owls and quite close by. We shone a spotlight into the trees and saw one owl fly into a nearby tree. The two bantered back and forth for many long minutes. Hearing an owl is such a magical thing, its low call ringing out in the silence of the night that we did not want to leave. But to follow protocol, we needed to finish our route before midnight – and our mechanical delay had already put us behind schedule. So although we did not want to leave this magical stop, we had no choice but to get back into the Jeep and drive to Stop Eight.

But now we had riled up our owls and they weren't quitting. All through to Stop Eight we could hear them cackling in the distance. We thought they may even follow us to our next stop, but they remained in the distance.

Stops Nine and Ten were cold and uneventful, but we were still high on the excitement of hearing our two owls that time flew by.

The Sand Dam Road route has been a forgotten route in the past because of the unpredictable nature of the road. It has been a tricky route for sure because we have had to battle either snow or washouts, but with rewards of a show of two Barred Owls calling back and forth, it all feels worth it!

Nocturnal Owl Survey

May 2, 2019

McConnell Lake Road

By Dick Tafel, Silver Owler

Yes, I know that the Ontario Nocturnal Owl Surveys are supposed to be completed in April. But April 2019 was like few others, and there was absolutely no day within that month that yours truly could manoeuvre a late night owl survey. Remember? The great snowstorms of that winter and the lingering cold! Virtually no days were above freezing.

Yes, there were a few – April 29 and 30 being two. But I had a special duty with my wife, Elsa, on the 29th and was just too tired on the 30th.

And so finally on May 2 at 7:20 p.m. with the temperature at 40 degrees F. (a more accurate manner of temperature fixing than Celsius), I met Jim Hasler and Lori Beckerton at Horton's in North Bay, and off we sped in Jim's car. I was assured by the pleasant and encouraging leaders at the owl headquarters that maybe a couple of days into May would not despoil all the years of past owl science.

Then along Highway 63 east towards our owl road – McConnell Lake Road - what should we come upon close to the edge, but a moose! (at right) It did not seem to be very upset at observing us. We considered seeing such a magnificent creature to be a good omen.

We then began our drive up the fairly well-maintained McConnell Lake dirt road towards the far end for our start, when we were interrupted by a slowly prodding, drunken-looking, wobbly American Woodcock. Maybe another good omen? Or maybe not?



Renee Levesque

We made the start on time, and could not help noting that the snow within the areas adjacent to the road was some 21 inches deep. A discarded paddle discovered nearby helped us to judge the depth of that lingering snow.

We played the tapes through the still-working speakers that are now about 20 years old. No loons sounded from nearby lakes – no doubt because the lakes were still very much frozen. No frogs, no

snipe, no woodcocks could be heard. In fact, nothing was heard that could remind us of the normal diversity of the habitat in which we found ourselves. This went on for four stops without even any vehicles to interrupt the supreme quietness.

Then at Stop 5 some light unpredicted rain started. And, hello! We heard a sought-after owl, a Barred Owl, and then another! They were so close by that one flew right over us! Our target had awakened!

Suddenly our efforts were not entirely in vain. Our survey became exciting! It always does when out of the utter darkness comes close-at-hand a spirited, nighttime owl! Its repeated call of *Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?* cannot be mistaken.

We tried to find more owls at the next two stops, but the rain continued and was coming down harder and harder, and so we decided we had enough discomfort. Besides, what owl is going to make an appearance in such a downpour?

Two owls, one moose and one woodcock on May 2! Despite being 2 days late, we were not reprimanded by the authorities and our report was accepted. We had performed another scientific analysis, the 25th year along this same unchanged habitat.



Dick Tafel