

# Great gray owl

*Strix nebulosa* By Mike Roberts

As daybreak gradually unveiled the clearing, a single rifle shot echoed from a distant mountain. Some lucky person's hunt had ended in the first minutes of the season. Having experienced such good fortune myself in previous seasons, I smiled. Soon afterward, another rifle cracked off to the south, but was followed by a volley of three quick rounds. I knew that feeling, too. But I wasn't there that day to notch my nonresident big-game license. I was after owls.

For hours, I meticulously glassed the long, narrow meadow from just inside the tree line. Finally, less than 40 yards away, a large, spectral shadow floated from the forest edge and dropped silently into the fallow-colored bunchgrass. With a meadow vole secured in its bill, the owl flew to a lodgepole snag. After swallowing the morsel, the great gray swiveled its head toward me, its bright yellow eyes meeting mine.

As a naturalist and wildlife photographer, locating and capturing images of these human-tolerant raptors is my top priority, greater even than taking a bull elk during my annual fall pilgrimage to Montana.

## Identification

The great gray, sometimes called "phantom of the North," is North America's largest owl, at least in stature (26 to 28 inches) and wingspan (four and a half feet). Though slightly shorter, the great horned owl weighs a bit more than the great gray's two pounds.

Often observed hunting during the day, the great gray owl's cryptic coloration is mostly a dusky gray, with contrasting dark gray bars on the back, and heavily streaked underparts.

Other distinguishing features include a lack of ear tufts and oversized facial disks with charcoal-gray, radial lines arranged concentrically to the close-set yellow eyes.

Virginia photographer and writer Mike Roberts regularly visits Montana.



The black chin is highlighted by a white "bow tie" of feathers.

Mating great gray owls make territorial calls back and forth at night in late winter and early spring, a soft *whoo-whoo-whoo* every 15 to 30 seconds.

## Range

Montana is one of only a few states in the Lower 48 where great grays reside. The grand owl also lives in Alaska, Canada, throughout northern Asia, and in northern Europe, where it is known as the Lapland owl.

In Montana, this uncommon year-round resident lives mainly west of the Continental Divide in pine, spruce, and fir forests laced with swamps, wet meadows, and parks. The raptor hunts in these open areas from perches in mature conifers or tall snags.

## Prey and hunting

Great gray owls eat small mammals, including voles, mice, pocket gophers, and snowshoe hares.

They can find their prey beneath two feet of snow thanks to facial disks that funnel sound waves to slightly asymmetrically positioned ear openings—one just slightly higher than the other. This physical adaptation produces three-dimensional hearing for pinpointing faint noises produced by small rodents using hidden travel corridors. With billowy body feathers and serrated primaries designed to muffle flight noise, these silent hunters descend from their perch and

## Scientific name

*Strix* is derived from the Greek *strizo*, meaning "to screech." Derived from the Latin *nebulosus*, meaning "misty" or "cloudy," *nebulosa* refers to the birds' clouded plumage.

plunge talons first into the snow, emerging moments later with their prey.

## Reproduction

Great gray owls nest in Montana from April through July, using abandoned hawk nests and tree snags. The female incubates two to four white eggs for approximately one month. She broods the owlets until their natal down molts and is replaced with protective feathers. During incubation and brooding, the male supplies food to his preoccupied mate. Within three weeks, the flightless juveniles vacate the nest and begin exploring nearby trees. The rambunctious young owls occasionally fall, making them susceptible to ground-dwelling predators.

## Conservation status

Symbolic of all things wild, Montana's great gray owls seem to adapt reasonably well to ever-increasing human populations, though some collide with vehicles or are illegally shot. Populations appear healthy within their range across North America. In Montana the great gray owl is considered a species of concern because so little is known about its habitat needs and population status. 🦉