



Every Picture Tells a Story

Phantom of the North

by Roy Wuitschik

Our doorbell rang in the early hours of a cold February morning. As I opened the front door, I was greeted by our neighbour. “Get your camera, there is something you should see!”

I wondered what it could be. The usual animal suspects came to mind: a bull moose, a whitetail buck, perhaps the elusive coyote. But these animals were frequent visitors to our area, and the urgency in my neighbor’s voice made it clear that this was something much more out of the ordinary.

Walking down the road alongside our neighbour, I tried prompting him for a clue as to what we were about to see, but he refused to offer any insight. Upon reaching the end of the cul-de-sac, the chatter stopped and we quietly stared at some unique patterns in the snow.

I quickly realized that we were belated witnesses to a rare scene that left some dramatic clues on the snow-covered ground. Two questions immediately came to mind: What creature made the patterns, and what unseen event took place?

Looking at the imprints in the snow, I concluded that none other than a Great Grey Owl could have created the impression. Often seen in the West Bragg Creek area, I have photographed this magnificent bird on several memorable occasions: usually capturing them sitting patiently on fence posts, watching for movement in the grass.

I have also been startled by Great Grey Owls, which would sometimes suddenly and silently swoop in front of me as I hiked nearby forest trails. Despite tracking their flight through



the trees in hopes they would land in a nearby tree and give me another good photo-op, they would always disappear with a few powerful flaps of their wings. With this remarkable stealth, it is easy to understand why the Great Grey Owl is sometimes called the 'Phantom of the North.'

But what exactly happened? We were left speculating about the impressions in the snow, observing the tracks coming into the scene from the right. Was it a rabbit, a marten, or a squirrel? Did something flush it from the cover of the trees?

On closer examination, the tracks suddenly ended where the owl had first touched down. Was this where the hapless victim was nabbed? It was very likely unaware of the owl sitting in a nearby tree, patiently watching, before being stabbed and snatched airborne in a deadly, breathtaking swoop.

It would have been remarkable to witness this great bird swoop down, talons extended, and grab its prey, hop along the snow, and take flight for a feast in the woods.

This wintertime scene left us with something equally amazing and enduring: beautiful imagery of a body shape depicting the natural instincts of a Great Grey Owl. You can see how it landed and brought its angel-like wings forward, along with the imprint of its head and the scrape of its tail feathers etched in the snow as it hopped along.

For us, this was an amazing depiction of a wild encounter: one that was well worth the early wake-up call.

Roy Wuitschik lives in West Bragg Creek and enjoys capturing images from the tiniest of subjects to the widest of panoramas.
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