



Canadian Natural History.

Owls.

(Striped.)

THE "feathered cat," as the Owl has been aptly termed, is popularly regarded with superstitious fear. Its nocturnal habits, and dismal screeching cry, have rendered it a favourite with painters, poets, and story tellers; and it is accordingly associated in the youthful imagination with ghosts, witches, demons, and magicians.

"In the hollow tree, in the old grey tower,
The spectral owl doth dwell;
Hill, hated, despised in the sunshiny hour,
But at dusk he's abroad and well.
Not a bird of the forest e'er mates with him,
All mock him outright by day;
But at night, when the woods grow still and dim,
The boldest will shrink away.
So when the cat, the hawk, and dogs do howl,
Sing Hail for the reign of horned Owl!
We know not always
Who are kings by day,
But the king of the night is the bold brown Owl."

The large head and solemn thoughtful eyes of this bird, won the admiration of the ancient Greeks and Romans, who made it the emblem of wisdom, sacred to Minerva.

There are upwards of 150 species of the Owl family, more than 40 of which inhabit this continent. They are all great benefactors to man. During the gloom of night, they fill the same offices which the bolder hunting Falcons perform in the open day; and serve to keep in check the over-production of those small mammals, to which nature has also appointed a nightly season. The various organs of the Owl are beautifully suited to this purpose. Though not adapted to the glare of noon-day, the vision of the bird is marvellously acute, in the dim evening or early morning. The peculiar formation and situation of

the eye, enable it to receive every ray of light which impinges on its surface. The ears possess a peculiarly delicate perception, and are contrived to catch sound in the broadest way. The plumage is of the softest texture, "falling gently on the air." The wings are constructed for a light, buoyant, and noiseless flight; while the colours of the plumage exhibit a union of tints best suited for concealment. There is a chaste and harmonious blending of the more sombre hues, mixing as a whole into a neutral tint; but which shows, on closer inspection, the most minute and delicate touches of "His unrivalled pencil." The tarsi and feet, though not shewing any great strength, are finely formed for grasping.

As we have already hinted, Owls are solitary birds. They generally retire during the day to holes in trees, caves, or old buildings, where they roost and breed. Much the larger proportion of them are nocturnal, but a few fly by day, as the Canada Owl, shortly to be noticed. The larger Owls feed on small quadrupeds and birds, while the smaller live on insects which fly abroad in the night, such as moths and beetles. "If the prey be small, it is swallowed whole, or is torn to pieces if necessary; and the indigestible portions, such as feathers, hair, and bones are disgorged from the stomach in small pellets." The female bird is larger than the male. The eggs are of a rounded form, and are always nearly pure white, in some assuming a slightly greenish tint. They vary in number from two to five. The young are covered with a fine down.

The five North American Owls, which form the subject of the spirited illustration at the head of this article, are as follows:—

1. CANADA OWL.—(*Surnia ulula*.)
2. VIRGINIAN EARED OWL.—(*Bubo Virginianus*.)
3. TENGMALM'S NIGHT OWL.—(*Noctua Tengmalmi*, Selby.)
4. SNOWY OWL.—(*Surnia nyctea*, Selby.)
5. SHORT-EARED OWL.—(*Otus brachyotus*.)

1. THE CANADA OR HAWK OWL, as it is frequently termed, approximates to the Falcons in its bold and diurnal habits, as well as in the absence of facial disk and ear tufts. The eyes, too, are somewhat differently formed from those of the generality of Owls. The bird follows its prey by daylight as well in darkness, and therefore possesses a modification of the ordinary owl's eye, which enables it to see without inconvenience in the light of noon-day. This bird is from sixteen to seventeen inches in length. The colour of the upper parts of the wings and body, is sooty brown, with dark brown stripes. The throat is white, with similar stripes. "It is very common in the fur regions, where it is often seen hunting by day, approaching the camps with great boldness." In the summer, it feeds on squirrels, mice and insects; and in the winter, principally on the ptarmigan and the grouse.

2. THE VIRGINIAN, OR AMERICAN GREAT HORNED OWL is from twenty to twenty-five inches long, with an extent of wings of from four and a half to five feet. The colour varies from dark brown to nearly white. It is a magnificent bird, and its flight is elevated, rapid, and graceful. It is a bold and destructive hunter Grouse, partridges, hares, ducks, and even turkeys become a prey to this voracious bird. "Its voice is of a hollow and wierd-like character, and, when heard by night from some spot on which the Owl has silently settled, is apt to cause many a manly but superstitious cheek to pale." Wilson well observes:—"The loud and sudden cry of Waugh O! Waugh O! is sufficient to alarm a whole garrison of soldiers."

3. TENGMALM'S OWL is also known as the DEATH BIRD, on account of a superstition which exists among several tribes of the Indians of North America. "When an Indian hears one of these birds uttering its melancholy cry, he whistles towards the spot from whence the sound proceeded, and if the bird does