

Winter, 2005



Photograph by Bruce DiLabio

### **Phantom of the North**

By Andrea Gage

With great and possibly unrealistic hopes, I set off on my skies in search of a great gray owl. A pair of great gray owls (*Strix nebulosa*), were sighted on Gatineau Park's Pink Lake trail earlier in the season. An unusual sighting, it drew the attention of birders in the area. The great gray is more common to the west, although this year there has been multiple sightings in the Ottawa area. Owls have an air of mystery around them and they have always fascinated me. I hoped that my afternoon excursion would allow me a glimpse of the largest of the owls in North America, an owl also known as the phantom of the North.

As I skied along the trail, I scanned the trees for the shape of the bird. My hopes of seeing the owl diminished as I considered the likelihood of spotting the dusky gray coloured bird among the gray of the trees. My search was also impaired by my inability to look sideways for any amount of time and still keep my balance. .

The great gray owl is 23-33 inches tall, with a wingspan of 60 inches (5 feet!). It is striped ventrally and has a large, round head with prominent (see phantom p 2)

Friends of Gatineau Park present

## The Dusk Series The Dusk Series

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### **AGM News**

At the annual general meeting of Friends of Gatineau Park, held at the Visitors Centre in Chelsea, November 5, three new members were elected, each with valuable experience in interpretation and education

Catherine Verreault has worked for the park in this field, as a program officer; Catherine Dumouchel, re-joining the board, is a specialist in environmental education at the Canadian Museum of Nature and Andrea Gage has experience in outdoor education at Fundy National Park.

André Carrier, the retiring president, remains on the board. He is succeeded in this post by John Cameron. Graeme Roderick continues as treasurer. (see agm p 2)

(phantom p 1)

facial disks. Its eyes and beak are yellow. An advantage to interested observers is the owl's habit of hunting during the day and its tendency to be quite tame. It is typically found in conifer forests near clearings and because of its large size, the owl flies low and short-distances. It 'still-hunts' for its food which consists mostly of voles but also includes other small mammals such as rats, mice, shrews, squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, moles, and weasels. The status of this owl worldwide and nationally is considered secure, although for both Quebec and Ontario, the species is listed as vulnerable by the NatureServe network.

As I neared the end of my ski trip, I accepted that the 'phantom' had eluded me. Disappointed, but determined to return again, I skied the last leg of my trip through the meadow by the hydro line (beside Mine Rd). With great fortune, I looked up and saw the owl's shape in a small tree. At 3:00 in the afternoon, it sat in front of me. Its head turned and I looked into the small yellow eyes of the great gray. A few interested people gathered and commented on the size of the bird saying they had never seen such a large owl before. Then, to our delight, it left the small branch and, flying low to the ground, found a new perch only a short distance away. The flight was awkward as its great, silent wings flapped.

After watching the owl for quite a while, I skied away with an experience I will remember all my life. In those eyes, I saw wildness. I wonder where the owl has come from? Is it passing through or will it winter with us? How many years has it lived and hunted? I am left wondering and feeling honoured.

(AGM News page 1)

Randi Shulman, with a strong interpretation background, is staffing our office (827 3113) one day a week (Monday) and helping plan events.

Reviewing activities of the past year, André mentioned the favorable response from participants in the workshops and outings, featuring bird and tree identification, wolf behaviour.

One of the continuing challenges, he said, is recruitment of members and seeking more financial support for interpretation initiatives.

## Christmas Bird Count 2004

On Sunday, Dec.11, the Friends of Gatineau Park encouraged visitors to participate in the Christmas bird count. This year marked the 105<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the count, which involves approximately 50,000 participants from across the Americas. The citizen-collected data includes the presence of bird species and their abundance in a given region. This information is compiled and used by scientists to identify trends and changes in the abundance and distribution of bird populations.

This year the goal of Friends was to contribute data to the regional count organized by the Ottawa Field Naturalist's club. Visitors to the center viewed specimens of winter birds in the park, received the checklist of Gatineau Park birds to take with them on their excursion, and were informed about the count and its importance. Some birds spotted by visitors included the downy woodpecker, mourning doves, white-breasted nuthatch, and the common redpoll. An encouragement for everyone to get out and look up into the trees came from an earlier spotting of a great gray owl along the Pink Lake trail. There was an enthusiastic response to the Christmas Bird Count and information from the overall count can be found at <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc>. All interested birders, beginner to expert, should keep in mind that the Christmas Bird Count is an annual event and that the Friends can be contacted to find out further information on this event next year. A list of Gatineau Park birds can be picked up at anytime in the Visitors Center; and is great way to keep a record of your bird sightings in the park. Happy birding!

Andrea Gage

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