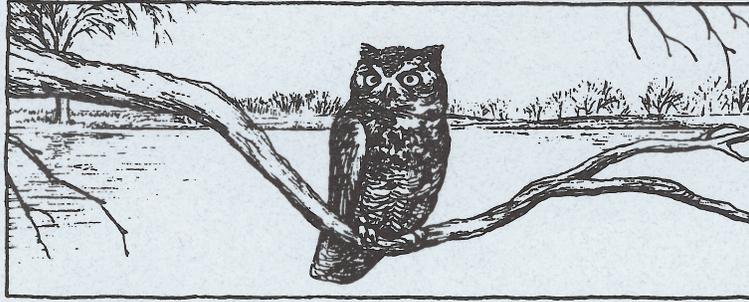


# STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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## Winter's Owl

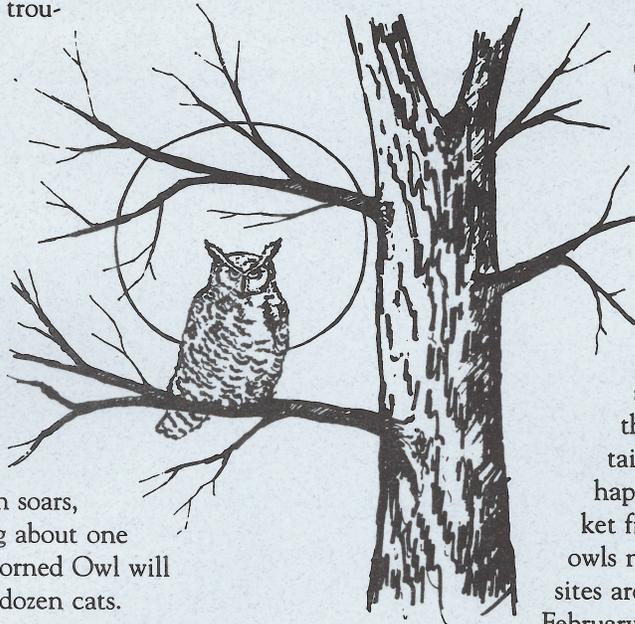
--Mark Spreyer

The January full moon is often described as the owl moon. This is because Great Horned Owl courtship is in full swing during the first month of the year. Courting owls are rarely seen but, here at Stillman, they are often heard: "Hoo/hoo - hoo - hoo... hoo - hoo/hoo - hoo."

That deep, low call means trouble for cottontails, squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, skunks, pigeons, sparrows, crows, crayfish, snakes and anything else that breathes and looks edible to a Great Horned Owl. The important thing to remember is that the Great Horned Owls are opportunists, not specialists like some other owls. What they choose off the menu is determined by its availability. If the rabbit population is high, they'll eat rabbits. If the mouse population soars, they'll eat mice. I'm not talking about one or two mice. In one night, a Horned Owl will hunt as many mice as would a dozen cats.

This is not to suggest that a Great Horned Owl is 12 times larger than a cat, although it may seem that big if you're surprised by one flying overhead at dusk. A male owl rarely reaches three pounds and the female averages between three-and-a-half and four pounds. They range in length from eighteen inches to two feet and have a wingspan in the neighborhood of four-and-a-half feet. The owl's colors are a mixture of brown, buff and black. This mix easily camouflages the bird during the day. At

night, such subtle tones are difficult to distinguish. Instead, the observer should look for two "horns" or tufts of feathers on either side of the head. Good binoculars will help you spot the bird's other identifying features which include large yellow eyes and a white patch of feathers on the throat.



Some of you may be wondering, "Just where does a bird this large nest?" The answer is, "Anywhere they want to." And 'anywhere' includes right here at the Nature Center.

Like other owls, the Great Horned Owl does not build a nest. Instead, it simply "recycles" some other bird's nest. Being adaptable creatures, owls are not too particular about whose nest they use. It might be the old nest of a Crow, squirrel, Red-tailed Hawk, Great Blue Heron, or, as happened here at Stillman, a laundry basket filled with sticks and chips. Since the owls nest in the dead of winter, most of these sites are "empty nesters." By the end of February, the owls have mated and are watching over a pair of eggs.

The variety of nest sites not only illustrates adaptability but also reflects the variety of habitats that can support a pair of Horned Owls. Take a look at the range map in a field guide to birds and you'll discover that the Great Horned Owl is a year-round resident from the tree line in northern Canada and Alaska south throughout North, Central and South America.

## STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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So, why nest so early? By spring, when young owls are partially grown and especially ravenous, many other animals are tending to their young families. Each animal family is just another fast food franchise to the owlets' parents. Also, as suggested earlier, it makes it easier to preempt a nest from its builder.

Does anyone mess with the young owl family? Not hardly. As Craighead and Craighead wrote in *Hawks, Owls and Wildlife*, "...the Horned Owl is the most powerful bird, ...it has preference as to its nest location and cannot be evicted by other raptors. It also can hunt or defend itself equally well by day or night. This is not true of the large hawks that might possibly dispute the owl's dominance."

Should you hear the hooting of a Great Horned Owl this winter, take the time to venture into the night and see if you can find the bird making the call. You may not spot the owl but, whooo knows, you just might. As the child in Jane Yolen's classic book, *Owl Moon*, says:

When you go owling  
you don't need words  
or warm  
or anything but hope.  
That's what Pa says.  
The kind of hope  
that flies  
on silent wings  
under a shining  
Owl Moon.

## PROGRAMS

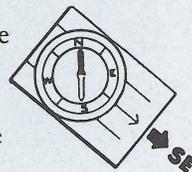
### OWL MOON WALK

Native Americans called January's full moon the "owl moon." In honor of this, Mark Spreyer will present an indoor presentation on owls. Afterwards, with the help of the almost full moon, we will walk the trails in search of Stillman's Great Horned Owls. Space is limited so call 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Sunday, Jan. 11  
Time: 6:00PM  
Age: 10 years and up  
Fee: None

### COMPASS USE

Learning to use a compass is a practical and fun outdoor skill. Unlike competitive orienteering courses, ours is a compass-guided nature exploration. Remember to dress appropriately as you are likely to encounter thorny shrubs. We'll provide instruction and compasses.



Date: Sunday, Jan 25  
Time: 2:00PM  
Age: 10 years and up  
Fee: None

### MAKING TRACKS

Join Susan Allman as she shows you how to recognize the different types of tracks made by winter's active animals. After an indoor introduction, explore Stillman's trails for signs of rabbits, squirrels, deer and fox. If there is no snow on the ground, the program will be cancelled.



Date: Sunday, Feb. 8  
Time: 2:00PM  
Fee: None

### NAME THAT TREE or THIS BUD'S FOR YOU!

Imagine that George Washington chopped down that cherry tree on his birthday. How could he tell which was the cherry? With the help of Stillman's naturalist, you'll learn how to identify black cherry and other mid-western trees. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will keep you from barking up the wrong tree! Come prepared for the weather and bring your questions. Teachers and garden club members are especially welcome.

Date: Sunday, Feb. 22  
Time: 2:00PM  
Age: 10 years and up  
Fee: None



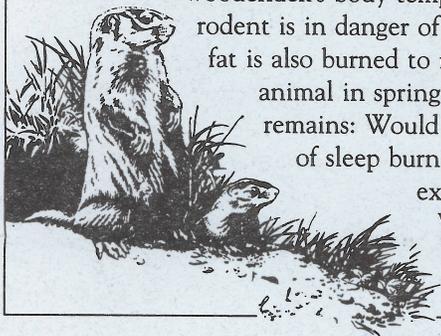
Questions? Please call 428-OWLS.

## HAPPY GROUNDHOG'S DAY

On February 2, the Groundhog is supposed to look at his shadow and tell us how much longer winter will last. What I wondered is how this mammal can hibernate for as long as eight months without eating! The answer lies in *brown fat*. What's brown fat, you ask? You see, as the autumn days shorten, a woodchuck eats like a, well, hog. The extra food is converted into a nutrient-rich fat reserve termed *brown fat* by biologists. When this fat reserve accounts for one-seventh of the groundhog's weight, the woodchuck retires to its burrow and soon begins its amazing hibernation.

During hibernation, brown fat is used to raise the woodchuck's body temperature if the rodent is in danger of freezing. This fat is also burned to reawaken the animal in spring. The question remains: Would eight months of sleep burn off a human's excess fat?

Wishful thinking, I know.



## WEATHER QUIZ

As we shiver and shovel our way through another winter, I thought the following might help put it in perspective. The answers are at the bottom. Good luck!

1) Northern Illinois has about \_\_\_\_\_ inches of snow in a year?

- a) 28 b) 30 c) 32 d) 33

2) Southern Illinois has about \_\_\_\_\_ inches of snow in a year?

- a) 10 b) 12 c) 15 d) 20

3) On July 5, 1911, 44 Chicagoans died of heat prostration. What was the temperature (in degrees F) in Chicago on that day?

- a) 100 b) 100.5 c) 101 d) 101.5

4) In the mid-afternoon of Nov. 11, 1911, the temperature registered just over 74°F. By 2:00AM the next morning, after a violent thunderstorm had passed through the area, the temperature had dropped \_\_\_\_\_ degrees.

- a) 28 b) 38 c) 48 d) 58

5) Northern Illinois averages \_\_\_\_\_ inches of precipitation (which includes rain, melted snow, sleet and other forms of moisture) in a year?

- a) 30 b) 32 c) 34 d) 36

6) Southern Illinois averages \_\_\_\_\_ inches of precipitation in a year?

- a) 34 b) 36 c) 38 d) 40

7) According to the U.S. Weather Signal Office, what was the wind speed (in mph) on LaSalle St. during the Great Chicago Fire?

- a) 55 b) 60 c) 65 d) 70

8) With an average wind speed of 10.4 mph, where does Chicago rank among the windiest cities in the United States.

- a) 1st b) 6th c) 10th d) 16th

9) There *are* colder places than Chicago. For example, one of the lowest temperatures reported in the lower forty-eight states was -70°F. Name the state in which this reading was recorded.

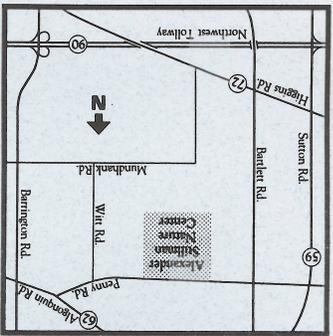
- a) Montana b) Minnesota  
c) Maine d) North Dakota

10) Speaking of cold, consider Canada's Arctic region. While many birds breed there in the summer, few can survive an Arctic winter. Which of the following is one of the few that regularly tough it out through an Arctic winter?

- a) Snowy Owl b) Tundra Swan  
c) Winter Wren d) Arctic Tern

Answers: 1) b. 30" 2) a. 10" 3) d. 101.5° 4) c. 48° It was only 26° at 2:00AM. 5) c. 34" 6) d. 40" 7) b. 60mph 8) d. 16th Great Falls, MT ranks 1st. 9) a. Montana 10) a. Snowy Owl

Frank & Alice Spreyer  
 55 Otis Road  
 Barrington IL 60010  
 98



email: stillnc@flash.net  
 (847) 428-OWLS  
 South Barrington, IL 60010  
 33 West Penny Road

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