

A Barred Owl is perched on a tree branch in a snowy forest. The owl has white feathers with dark brown vertical bars on its chest and wings. Its face is white with dark brown eyes and a small yellow beak. The background is a blurred winter scene with snow-covered branches and evergreen trees. The text "Nocturnal Owl Survey 2021" is written in a white serif font in the upper right corner.

Nocturnal Owl Survey 2021

Art Heeney

Nocturnal Owl Survey And the winner is...

For those who have not read the Nocturnal Owl Survey reports before, you really must. They are lively and entertaining and would make you want to take part in a survey that keeps you out in the dark and cold for three hours and keeps you up past midnight. The most wonderful things go bump in the night: owls, foxes, wolves, snipes, bittern, grouse, to say nothing of a great, big shining moon, and not just any moon, but a Super Pink Moon.

It just so happened that Dick Tafel and Jim Hasler did their survey the night of that Super Pink Moon, April 26, which Dick waxes poetic about in his report. It's a good job the moon was shining like a jewel that night because Jim lost his cell phone and the twosome had to backtrack 2 kms to find it, but find it they did. With that and Jim's late arrival in meeting up with Dick and a survey that takes place 50 miles away, it's a wonder they were able to get their survey started and completed on time. But they did and for their extra efforts, got four Barred Owls and a Ruffed Grouse.

That is one more than April McCrum and her husband Corey got on their Restoule run, but they had an encounter of a vicious kind. The nightlife of owls can be very dramatic indeed!

Lori Anderson and Ken Gowing, who held their survey on the same night as April and Corey, coincidentally saw the same number of Barred Owls as them. But instead of an owl dispute, Lori and Ken heard a loud human dispute, as well as many barking dogs. I got such a



Barred Owl, Stephen O'Donnell

laugh out of Lori's remark that despite the unseasonably warm weather on April 5, she and Ken, through experience, bundled up as if heading out on an Antarctic expedition. In addition to the three Barred Owls, Lori and Ken also heard three American Woodcocks and a Ruffed Grouse. (Lori and Ken were the first winners of the coveted owl trophy in 2017.)

Then there was Oriana Pokorny and her sister. They had one exciting time almost stop after stop. Oriana's enthusiasm is so very palatable in her writing that you feel as if you are there with her and her sister. She had warned her sister not to expect much in the way of excitement based on previous owl surveys when she was lucky to hear even one Barred Owl, but after you read Oriana's report, you can understand why her sister is skeptical that other years were less than exciting. Their tally was four Barred Owls, a Boreal Owl, an American Woodcock and three Ruffed Grouse, to say nothing of a howling wolf!

And finally, Gary, Connie and Rachel Sturge: The winners of the owl trophy every year from 2018, a trophy Gary wants to pass on to someone else, at least that is what he said at the very last in-person Bird Wing meeting we had in March 2020. (See photo at right of Dick presenting Connie and Gary with the trophy for 2019.)

To that end, and before the Owl Survey was cancelled by Birds Canada for 2020 because of the pandemic, Gary came up with some complicated formula for determining the winner of the trophy. (The Sturges, as a family, did the survey last year despite the cancellation because they were living under the same roof anyway.)

Normally I, as Bird Wing Scribe,

decided the winner based on the number

and type of owls seen, as well as the writing and other things, such as what else was seen, how tough the route is, the route conditions, etc. I can't recall the formula, so I am basing the winner on what I always based it.

At stop 8, where the owl attacked the Sturge boom box last year, this year one flew down so close to Connie she could feel its wings on her face. Why Connie and not Gary? Because Connie was wearing a hat that has the same colours in it as an owl. (A deliberate choice perhaps?) Gary is positive the owl that greeted them last year is the same as this year. He dares



Sarah Wheelan

you to think any differently and has photos to prove it is the same owl on the same birch tree! Take a look in Gary's report and see what you think.

It is hard to beat the Sturge threesome. They have a fantastic route close to home, a route Gary swore he will never ever give up. This year did not disappoint: The threesome saw or heard 9 Barred Owls, a Boreal Owl, two Wilson's Snipes, a Sandhill Crane, two foxes, and a ghost bat.

Still, tough as it is, I have to give the trophy to Oriana and her sister. You did want there to be another winner, Gary, and though Oriana and her sister had 5 owls to your 10, she did have a wolf to your foxes – and I think one wolf trumps two foxes even if this is an owl survey – and her route has not been the greatest in the past, whereas yours always is.



Every report is lively and fun to read. Everyone is a winner, really. The only reason a trophy – and you can see from the 2019 photo it is but a fun trophy – was ever introduced was to add to the fun of the evening while providing data as citizen scientists. At our meetings, we heard only about the number of owls seen and not all the other exciting things that happen on a cold evening on lonely, mostly isolated roads. A written report provides much more than the number of owls seen, although that is important, and the reports are made available to all Bird Wing members and others once it is posted on Nipissing Naturalist Club's website. We are a fun group and owlers are perhaps the most intrepid of birders!

(As an aside, the cover photo is by Art Heeney whose photo came second in Nipissing Naturalists Club's photo contest in the Wildlife category; and the photo of the fox above is by Greg Jaski, whose winning photo came first in the Wildlife category.)

- Renee Levesque

Nocturnal Owl Survey

April 5, 2021

Graham Lake

By Lori Anderson

Ken and I have learnt from previous seasons that it is best to prowl for owls early in April before the frogs and water melt get too noisy. The Graham Lake route begins about 5 miles from my farm, passes by the farm and ends just 3 or 4 miles from home. How convenient! However, the roads can be busy, and so we choose a night that is not Thursday, Friday or Saturday for a more peaceful survey. The weather must be still and clear. All these conditions were met on April 5th.

It was a beautiful night, dead still and above freezing. Using past experience as our guide, we bundled up as if heading on an Antarctic expedition. There are 10 stops, each requiring we stand still and quiet, listening for about 20 minutes and only about 2 minutes in the car for warm-up in between each. We are chilled at completion!

Each stop will potentially reward us with an answering owl. Or not. There are other possible rewards: American Woodcocks (seen below) peenting and displaying; Ruffed Grouse drumming; Wilson's Snipe winnowing; or American Bitterns calling. There is more: Dogs responding enthusiastically to owl calls and dog owners responding to barking dogs in annoyance and sometimes with profanity.



Stop 4 is our personal favourite. Over the years, one homestead nearby has accumulated increasing numbers of large (sounding) dogs. But the dog owners' strategy for coping with the barking is unique. They play loud rock music and when the barking gets loud, the music gets louder. We are not often able to report birds of any sort at Stop 4, and have the greatest difficulty trying to laugh silently.

We are to record the number of cars that pass by at each stop. It is a distraction and an interruption when they pass even briefly. It is more of an interruption when they stop, usually to inquire about our need for assistance. Once we were asked "What are you doing?" This was the opening line. Ken quickly responded, "An Owl Survey. What are you doing?" I let Ken do the talking now when cars stop. This past survey was quiet - no one was about to risk a Covid infection by stopping to ask a question.

At Stop 3, however, we overheard a very heated domestic dispute. It was embarrassing and it certainly was distracting, especially as this was our first stop to produce a Barred Owl response. The disputers would have heard the owl too if they had stopped shouting at each other for a minute. Too bad.

Every year the survey produces different results, different owl species at different locations and different mishaps, technological or otherwise. Graham Lake Owl Route never fails at the final stop or two to bring out the Barred Owls. This year an obvious pair emerged from the forest, vocalizing anxiously. They perched in a tree beside us. We used a light to get full advantage of a rare opportunity. I hope they were not too distressed, perhaps they were even expecting us.



Ken Gowing

Final Tally: Barred Owl - 3
American Woodcocks - 3
Ruffed Grouse - 1
Cars - 6
Dogs - lost count

A note for new birders: Ken and I heard both the Barred Owl and the Great Horned Owl on numerous occasions this spring within the same area as our route. We simply stood outside after dark for a few minutes. The playback was not at all necessary. If the owls are about, they will call in April.

Nocturnal Owl Survey

April 5, 2021

Restoule Provincial Park

By April McCrum

With the temperature at a pleasant 11⁰C, my husband Corey and I began our Nocturnal Owl Survey from the gate of Restoule Provincial Park. At the park gate, we were greeted by an American Woodcock, a pleasant surprise as this was the first I had seen this year. I looked at this encounter as a hopeful sign that we would have more nocturnal bird encounters as the evening progressed.

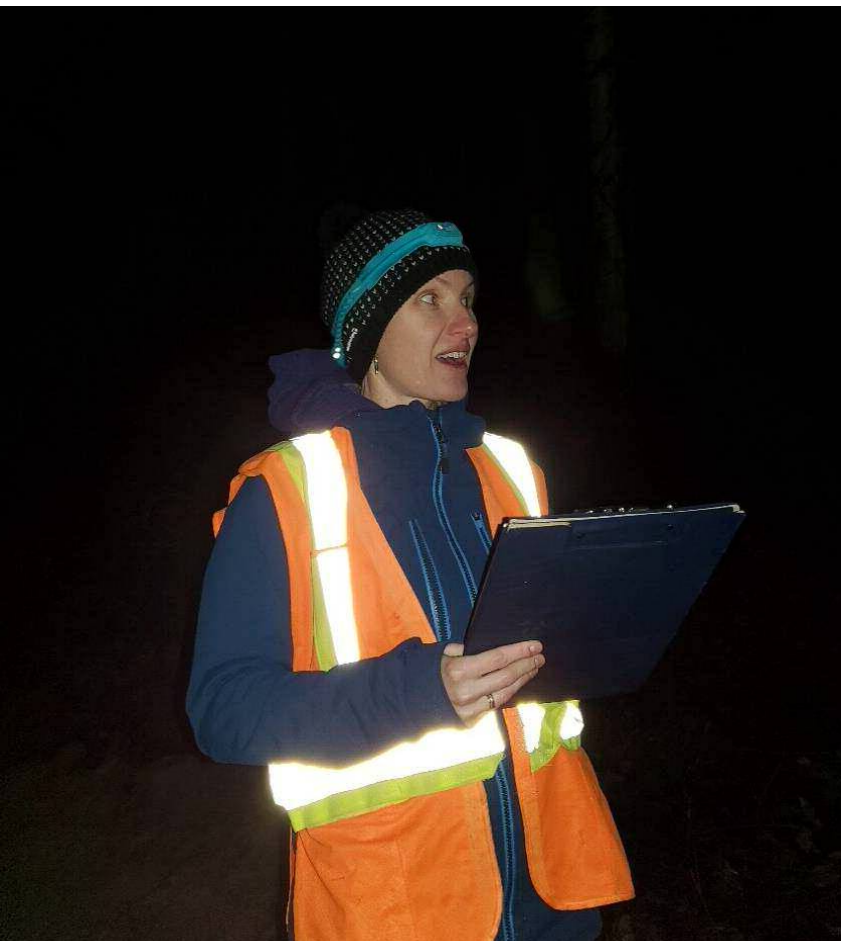
We observed two Barred Owls up close at our third stop when one male swooped in and landed in a tree above our vehicle. He continued to call back to the recording to what he thought was a male within his territory. He was then met by the male that actually did share the same territory and landed beside him! They became very vocal, calling back and forth. They then moved to another tree

where the one male attacked the other with its claws! After our time was up, both continued to communicate with what seemed to be “Get out of here, this is my spot!”

In addition to that exciting encounter, we heard only one other Barred Owl at one of our stops, calling about 250m in the distance.



Corinne Landini



Corey Witham

Nocturnal Owl Survey

April 26, 2021

McConnell Lake Route

By Dick Tafel

It was 6:00PM, April 26. There was no wind in North Bay and it had been quite sunny earlier in the day. The vital, annual owl survey for Ontario had to be concluded before the end of the month. Many other activities had crowded into the calendar of the local area's major, yearly participant, Richard Tafel. He had to miss last year, the first in ever-so-many past efforts because of the coronavirus pandemic.

It was time to get organized! Jim Hasler, an intrepid birder within the district, had been contacted and was ready to go! The meeting of the two, namely Jim and yours truly, was set for 7:45 at a quiet parking lot next to the main highway leading to the ultimate destination.

Yours truly had driven into town earlier to obtain new batteries for the complicated system used for many years to contact the owls. He had checked and re-checked to ensure that all necessary equipment was organized and ready to be implemented during the search that was to ensue, and that all was packed within the search vehicle.

Jim was a bit late arriving which meant that the search vehicle had to be driven rather quickly to the ultimate starting site, about fifty miles away. The last 20 miles was along a rough forest road. Such road in past years had been rutted and covered with snow and busy with forestry trucks.

As they rumbled along the road, they were greeted by an inquisitive Ruffed Grouse (right), anxious about his own fortune no doubt, but safe and sound after the owl survey car's quick by-pass.

Fortunately, no trucks hindered the drive, a drive that was helped by recent grading so that the potholes were fairly limited. The two stalwarts made it to the commencement point just 5 minutes after the stipulated starting time – namely ten minutes before 9:00 p.m. which was to have been 1/2 hour after the local sunset.



Renee Levesque

The equipment was emplaced upon the vehicle roof and a special tape started booming owl sounds almost immediately. Both human participants were quick to gather about, listening intently for possible replies. They also listened for possible American Woodcock within the vicinity. But at stop one, no sounds whatever were heard!

A move was then dictated for the next of ten planned locations, each two kilometres apart.

Again the equipment was set up and boomed its initial Northern Saw-whet Owl call (right), followed by four sets of Barred Owl hootings, over a period of some 15 minutes. The two listeners walked a long distance away from the call point to ensure they did not somehow miss a reply from a distant owl.

No cars at all passed throughout the evening. No loons disturbed the solitude. No frogs were even peeping – until just before the last stop. The latter issue was no doubt due to the fact that the temperature was by then down to the freezing point, though with no winds at all, the cold was not too intense for the human seekers.

But another manifestation of the solitude and enormity of the whole undertaking began to intrude upon the scene. A full moon broke through a thick cloud and showed its surreal image directly upon the group. It was, it seems, to become internationally

famous as the Super Pink Moon with its religious and spiritual significance in India and other parts of the world. As it glared at us as we moved slowly down the long wooded road, it could not be more mysterious. Little did we know then of its glorious significance. It simply glowed massively, making our trek for a while seem almost in daylight.

No sounds again at the third stop.

And none at the fourth until after the last of the five call periods



Gary Chowns



from the speaker. Then far in the distance, heard first only by Jim, came the calls of two, maybe three Barred Owls, all competing. At last some success in the night's perilous efforts!

Being more optimistic now, the owl explorers moved another two kilometres and heard – nothing. To the sixth spot – nothing! But, as they started to leave, Jim noted the disappearance of his expensive cell phone. It had to be somewhere back behind us. And so a slow commute had to be undertaken back to the last stopping place, 2 kms. away, to search for the lost phone - and there on the road, somehow Jim spotted it! Good that it was found.

Now four kilometres down the road. More calls. No responses. Not even a noise.

To a seventh location they went, still optimistic. A few tree frogs were heard, a result possibly of slightly warming temperatures. And then again after the fourth Barred Owl call from the speaker, two such owls responded, this time from the west. They did not come much closer, but they certainly repeated their easily recognizable calls. And so that made four Barred Owls for the evening!

Two more spots until the stipulated trip was finished. No more owl responses, but it was midnight by then, and time to continue on home, the ten-stop ritual completed for another year!

It had to be counted as quite a success – four hooting Barred Owls, a completely silent drive for 3 hours in the dark, all reinforced by a mysterious, full moon.

By 1:45 when bed at last beckoned, yours truly was obviously very tired out. But reflecting upon a strange night covered over by that mystery moon, he had the feeling that it was all worthwhile - a journey of hope for future owls in our unique, quiet, boreal forests.



Renee Levesque

Nocturnal Owl Survey

April 24, 2021

Powassan Area

By Gary Sturge

It was a dark and stormy night.....no no.....wrong survey!

It was not so dark and stormy, but rather a pleasant spring night ideal for owling in the hinterland. Temperature was a pleasant 11 degrees C at the start and a not so cold 7 degrees C at the finish. No snow anywhere. The clouds cooperated and were absent at the start, growing to a light 25% cover at the end. The moon was gorgeous and illuminating. All in all, perfect conditions.

STOP 1

So the three members of the team, Con, Rachel and I, headed out, arriving at the first stop in time to leisurely set up the operation – compass, clipboard, flashlights, camera, boom box and all. This was the first time at this location that there wasn't a torrent of noisy water running in the creek and the road wasn't inundated and muddy. It prophesied good things ahead!

We started the call CD and waited. Rachel insisted there was something zooming back and forth over our heads, but no one saw anything - the elusive ghost bat no doubt.

After the first BARR call we got a very distant response. The subject moved closer and burst forth over us on the second call. The third call brought in his mate and they sat and caterwauled until the final grunt of the CD.

Score: 2 Barred Owls. Tonight's survey looks like a winner!

STOP 2

Down the road, same routine, set up and listen. Even the owls had adapted to it. The first Barred Owl was initially distant but came out to see and be seen and brought along his mate.

Score: another 2 Barred Owls. Yes, this survey looks like a good one!

STOP 3

We arrived and were sufficiently distant from the house of last year's grumpy owner with his barking dog. We did our thing and as we listened, the peepers peeped and a fox barked in the enveloping woods. Soon enough a Barred Owl joined us and came out for a look-see.

The score looked great so far: 5 Barred Owls, 3 of them seen.

The route crosses Hwy 534 at this point and heads up the isolated King Side Road. No "anything" after the first kilometer and a bit, just encompassing woods.

STOP 4

Just past the last lonesome house, we set up, but alas we were disappointed. No response this year - just us and another lonely fox.

STOP 5

Two kilometers on and again we were rewarded with another Barred Owl who also came out for a visit.

Score: 5 stops and 6 owls. We're batting 1000!!

Now the next stop is on Green Acres Road. (I can never understand how they named this road as I recollect that old TV show.) The road is through extensive woods and goes out to McQuaby Lake.

STOP 6

We set up in the dark silent woods, but to no avail. No success at this stop.

STOP 7

Further along past a small swamp and the only residence on this road, we broke out the kit and began the call. The first two minutes of silence passed and while I was writing distractedly on the clipboard and Con and Rachel were quietly discussing the merits of something, a **Boreal Owl** BWOOH call burst forth and Rach and Con erupted in not-so-quiet excitement!

Then the Boom Box went BWOOH. Confusion reigned briefly until we sorted it out. A genuine Boreal Owl had called just before the Boom Box called. The owl called twice more but after the first BARR call decided silence was the better course of action. (Barred Owls will eat Boreal Owls). A Wilson's Snipe calling at this point added to the hysteria. All the BWOOHs and BARRs finally attracted a real Barred Owl who flew out to inspect the ruckus just before the final grunt ended the process.

Score: 7 stops and 8 owls, 7 Barred and 1 Boreal. Back on track!

STOP 8

Now this stop is out at McQuaby Lake. There are a number of homes and cottages around and a few years ago, we selected the most unobtrusive site from which to broadcast. We've always met with success here and sure enough after the second BARR call, out came the local Barred Owl. Now I say local because for the past four years this very owl (I'm sure) has flown out to us and sat in the same birch tree.

Last year, when joined by his caterwauling mate, he attacked the poor boom box. This year he was annoyed more than usual. Presently his mate joined him and sat in another tree egging him on. Con, Rach and I were in front of the truck and photographed him, further upsetting him since he flew just over our heads to a tree across the road. We turned to observe him and twice more he attacked, flying just 4 feet off the ground and so close that Con felt the rush of air on her face from his wing. (Now Con knits a lot and makes toques/hats etc. and was wearing a recent creation done in brown with white stripes.) Jeez that kinda looks like a Barred Owl body I observed. Ahhh, now all was clear. Con's head was obviously a competing owl!

Soon the grunt sounded and we quickly piled into the truck to make our escape.

Score: 8 stops and 10 owls, 9 Barred and 1 Boreal

2021: The Attacker of the Hat



2020: The Attacker of the Boom Box



I ask you..... are these not the same culprit....even same birch tree?
(Photos by Rachel Sturge.)

STOP 9

We backtracked to Wolfe Lake Road and off to the next stop. We did our thing, but to no avail. The only birds attracted were a Sandhill Crane which flew slowly across the moon in silence and a distant Wilson's Snipe.

STOP 10

There was no excitement at this stop either, except for lots of peepers in the nearby swamp. This is where we encountered the only vehicle all night and after it passed, we put things away and climbed into the truck and headed home.

We were all exhausted having Bird Bashed most of the day and surveyed for 3 hours.

Final outcome.....SUCCESS!!!

10 Stops and 10 owls, 9 Barred and 1 Boreal; 2 Wilson's Snipe; 1 Sandhill Crane; 2 lonely Foxes; and an illusionary Ghost Bat!

Till next year.

Nocturnal Owl Survey

April 17, 2021

Sand Dam/Tomiko Route

By Oriana Pokorny

Every year that I have had this owl route, winter has been long and overwhelming and unwilling to let go. I have had to wait each year until the last possible day to run my owl survey. The forest access road it runs along has always been a mix of snow-covered, mud-covered and washed-out.

This year, for whatever reason, spring had sprung early - as in ***record-setting early***. Winter was also ***record-setting mild***. Very little snow in the forest and an early onset of warm weather meant that my typically snowed-in-forest-road was open and accessible in early April!!

Due to Covid, my usual owl route buddies were unavailable, but luckily my sister was more than up to the task and anxious to put her new Subaru CrossTrek to the test on some proper back roads.

We got to the starting point near Mitchell Lake just after sunset and were pleased to watch an American Woodcock flying circles around the small open area to the south of us. As the sun set and the owl survey began, we were inhibited in our ability to hear any actual owls by the never-ending cacophony of frogs. Having always done this route with snow cover, I was not prepared for how loud the frogs would be. Spring peepers, wood frogs and tree frogs were all singing at the first stop. We also heard an American Bittern (right).



Oriana Pokorny

Just as the last of four calls finished on our loudspeaker at our first stop, we heard a Boreal Owl calling in the distance. I jumped up and down! Some years I don't even hear Barred Owls on this run, and now we have a Boreal!! And at the first stop!!! Just as my excitement starts to wane, I am distracted by the woodcock that starts another round of flight and we almost miss a Barred Owl calling far off to the east of us.

As we get into the car to drive to the next stop, I tell my sister that it is unusual to get so much activity at one stop and not to expect the whole evening to be so exciting. But Stop 2 had just as many frogs and another displaying woodcock. After the third Barred Owl call from our speaker, we hear a Boreal Owl respond (right). Again, quite far away and in roughly the direction we had come, so I am assuming it is the same individual that we heard at our first stop. But it is so nice to hear him not just at one stop, but at two!

Yet again I tell my sister how unusual all this activity is for this route as we drive to Stop 3. No owls or any birds... just many, many frogs. But wait... is that a Sora in the mix... or just an odd spring peeper? I will have to go back and investigate another evening because whatever it was stopped calling as soon as I got out my camera to record the sound. I do love a good mystery.



Lloyd Sparks

Stop 4 had a Barred Owl nearby, but not too close. He called to us three times, but then quit. He didn't seem to come any closer. By this point my sister no longer believes my insistence upon telling her stories of standing in the silent cold for 15 minutes at every stop.

As we pull up to Stop 5, I am calling my sister my new good luck charm and demanding that she now has to come to all of my owl surveys! But I spoke too soon for all we heard at this site were a couple of lonely frogs and a Ruffed Grouse drumming. This would have had me so excited in a normal year, but this year... felt like a letdown.

Stop 6 we had another call twice from the distance.

Stop 7 is where I saw Barred Owls the last time I ran the route, but this year, only a Ruffed Grouse.

Stop 8 started very quiet, quieter than the other stops. No frogs, no grouse. We were up higher, out of the wetlands. Then we heard the ruffle of wings very close and I grabbed my sister by the arm and she pointed at the trees. There was a Barred Owl (right) not 20m from us to our right. We were frozen in place watching her and I nearly jumped out of my skin when another owl called not 10m to our left. We both swiftly turned our heads to look in that direction as our quiet owl flew over to the caller and then both started to sing together. We couldn't believe our luck. What an amazing scene!! Then across the road – behind us – a third Barred Owl started to join in! One of the pair flew over our heads across the road to yell at the new interloper. Our tape ended but we continued to watch and listen.



Art Heeney

I didn't want to leave, but my sister is more practical than me. She reminded me of the time and that we still had two more stops to go. So I begrudgingly got back in the car.

Near the end of our recording at Stop 9, we heard the owls from Stop 8 calling in the distance, but they stayed where they were.

Our final stop was in some ways the quietest of all the stops. Again, the frogs were silent this far from the wetlands. We heard a Ruffed Grouse as soon as we got out of the car, but then nothing. Then about halfway through we turned and looked at each other in amazement when we heard a wolf howling to the north of us. We both exclaimed, "So, cool!" to each other, almost in unison. It howled a few times and then was silent. We stood there quietly for a few minutes more, obediently waiting for the beep that marked the end of our allotted listening time. As the recording finished, I turned to my sister and said; "That was the freaking best Owl Survey night of my life – bar none!"

