



Who is that camouflage wizard above? Its shape and colors help it hide. With its face turned away, the figure seems to disappear completely from view. Now you see it. Now you don't!

On the PROWL for OWLS

BY ELLEN HOROWITZ; PHOTOS BY DANIEL J. COX/NATUREEXPOSURES.COM

The wizard in the photos at left is an owl—a *great gray owl*, to be exact. Imagine prowling through the woods, in search of one, even in broad daylight. If it's sitting still and you don't notice its big eyes, the owl might as well be invisible.

Bring on the dark of night, when many owls fly from their hideouts on silent wings. Wow—prowling for owls is like a challenging game of hide-and-seek. It's also serious business, as you'll soon discover. Good thing there are owl-prowl pros!

MEET THE EXPERT

Denver Holt is one such pro. He even started the Owl Research Institute in Montana. The Institute has a whole team of pros who learn all they can about owls. Then they share what they learn with other people who study—or just love—owls. But first, they have to track the owls down. How does Denver do this? He becomes part detective and part spy.

In late winter and early spring, Denver works at night. He goes to places—often on snowshoes or skis—where he thinks owls might be. Beneath the starry skies, he starts making calls. These calls aren't on a cell phone. He imitates the calls of different owls.

Each kind of owl has its own sound. Big owls hoot. Little owls toot, whistle, or trill. Since owls

are so hard to see, the best way to know if they're around is to listen. And this is the season when owls are calling for mates. If one hears Denver's call, it just might answer.

Meet Denver Holt and friend, a snowy owl chick (above). Denver needs to give the chick a checkup. He keeps it warm in his jacket until he can return it safely to its nest.

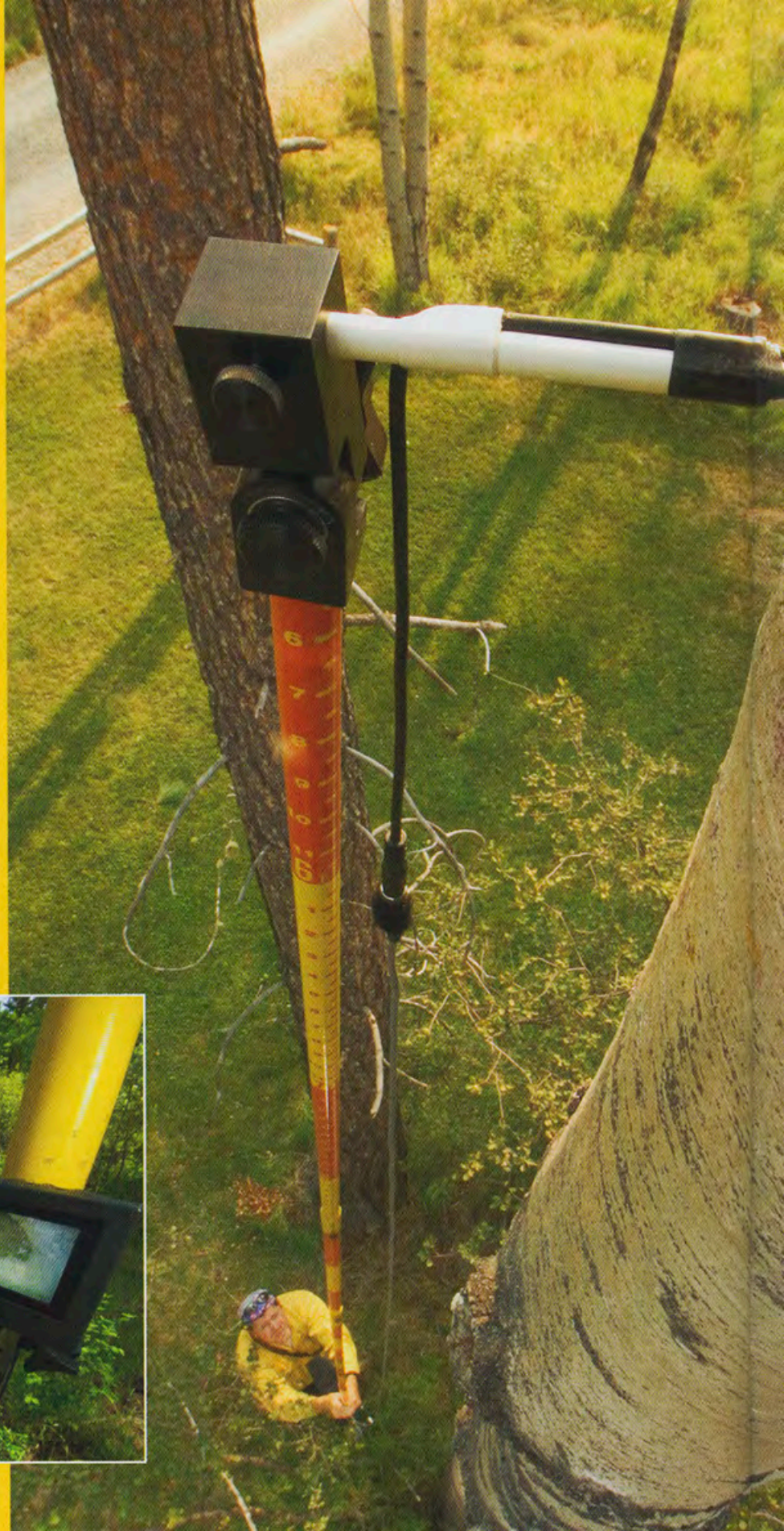


Denver writes notes in his field journal about the owl calls he hears and where he hears them. Later in the spring, he hikes back to those places during daylight. He looks for nests and other clues that will help him locate the birds.

SNOOPING AROUND

Some owls lay their eggs in old stick nests made on branches by hawks, crows, ravens, magpies, or squirrels. Denver uses binoculars to scan such nests for a rounded shape atop any of them. That could be a mother owl that has moved in and is sitting on eggs.

Many small owls use natural tree holes or old woodpecker homes. How can you tell if an owl is nesting inside a tree? The same way you find out if a friend is home: knock on the door. To see if an owl is home, Denver uses a stick to tap or scrape the





trunk. Certain kinds of owls poke their heads out to see who's there.

For owls that won't answer a knock, Denver has a special tool, called a "peeper," to spy inside a tree hole. The peeper has a camera attached to the top of a long pole. Near the bottom of the pole is a monitor that lets Denver see inside the hole from the ground. This spying doesn't seem to bother the owls.

At left, Denver raises a "peeper pole" and aims the camera at the top of the pole inside a high-up nest hole. Then he lets the young owl prowler at far left check the monitor near the bottom of the pole. What does she see? A pygmy owl mom, keeping her baby fuzzballs warm and safe (above).

While a group of kids watch, Denver places a small metal I.D. band around the leg of a baby saw-whet owl (right). If people find the banded bird later and report it, Denver will learn where and when the owl was found. It's kind of like getting a message from a child that's grown up and left home.

KEN BRATE / PHOTO RESEARCHERS, INC. (36TL)



Check out that fuzzy lump at the base of a tree (1). It's an owl pellet. An owl coughed it up while sitting on a branch overhead. Denver can discover what the owl ate by pulling the pellet apart to see what's inside (2).



GOOD-NEWS CLUES

There are other clues that Denver searches for. These might lead him straight to an owl in a nest tree or *roost* (resting place).

One clue is *whitewash*. That's just a nice name for bird poop—and lots of it. The poop often collects below a favorite perch where an owl sits, day after day. It spatters onto twigs, branches, the trunk, and the ground. The bright white splashes are like a neon sign that tells Denver, "Look here! Look up!"

Denver also looks for "puke balls." Owls swallow their food whole or in large chunks. Then they throw up the tough parts, packed into tidy bundles called *pellets*. A pellet might be made

up of beaks, bones, insect parts, feathers, and fur. Pellets often appear beneath an owl's favorite roost. If Denver finds any on the ground, he inspects the closest trees for an owl. He also inspects the pellet to find out what the owl ate.

A stray owl feather is an excellent clue that the feather's owner might be nearby. Denver checks for feathers on the ground, poking out from a stick nest, or caught on a branch.

OWLS FOREVER

Once Denver finds an owl and its nest, he can collect more information. How many eggs are there? How are the owlets (baby owls) doing? What are they eating? How long do they stay in the nest?



Denver might even climb up to the nest so he can check each owlet close up. He might also put I.D. bands on their legs. Maybe he or someone else will find one of these banded owls later. That could reveal important details about that species of owl, such as how long it lives or how far it travels.

Prowling for owls takes skill and patience. But Denver knows how important it is to learn about the family life of owls, the kinds of places they live, and the foods they eat. The more Denver and his team learn, the more they can teach others. And the more people know and care about owls, the more likely they'll be to make sure owls will always be around. Wouldn't you like to be an owl prowler, too? 🦉

GO ON AN OWL PROWL

Maybe there's an owl prowler like Denver Holt at a nature center near you. If so, sign up for a night hike and go prowling for owls! If not, head out with family and friends and follow these owl prowling tips.

1. Whooo's There: Look in a bird field guide to find out which owls live in your area and where to look for them. A librarian can help you. Also check out online guides (see box below) and listen to recorded owl calls.

2. Night Noise: In the evening, listen for owls hooting, tooting, whistling, or trilling. Late winter and early spring are usually the best times to hear owls calling for mates.

3. Give a Hoot: Imitate the call of an owl and see if the bird calls back to you.

4. Eye Spy: Return during the day to places where you heard owls calling. Look for whitewash, owl pellets, and owl feathers. If you find some, check carefully up in the trees. There might be an



owl tucked next to the trunk or perched on a limb.

5. Stick Figures: Keep track of trees in the area that have stick nests in them. They're easier to see before leaves start coming out in spring. Go back to those trees in late spring to see if an owl mom is using any of them. Take binoculars so you don't have to get so close that you disturb her.

6. Take Note: Keep owl-prowling notes in a field journal. Sketch a map of any owl hot spot you find and keep track of what you discover there over time. Use your field notes again next year to see if owls start a new family in the same area.

owlinstitute.org
Click on "Owl ID Guide."

birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds
Click on "Bird Guide" and then search for each owl by name.

enature.com
Click on "Birds" under "Field-Guides" and then on "Owls."



Find out more about owls online at globe.org/rr/owls