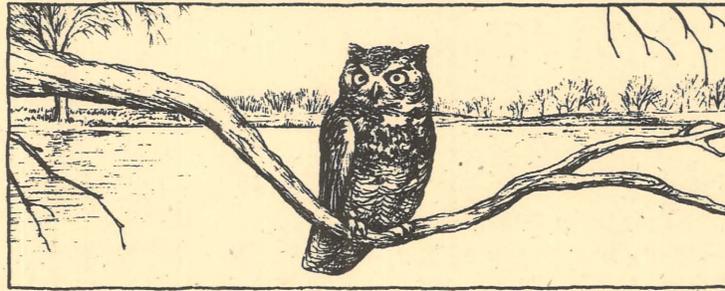


# STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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## THE LONG-EARED OWL: HIDE & SEEK

-- Mark Spreyer

When it comes to the long-eared owl (*Asio otus*), Julio De La Torre said it best, "The long-eared owl is the archetypal owl." He continues that no other owl has, "plumage so cryptic, or eyes so hypnotic.... And no other owl has more mysterious ways."

Thanks to our colleagues at the Willowbrook Wildlife Haven, we have added a long-eared owl to the permanently disabled raptors kept at Stillman.

What makes it so mysterious? Let's find out.

### Not a Horned Owl

Decades ago, I was told of a long-eared owl nest in a DuPage County pine plantation. As is often the case, the "long-eared owl" was actually a great horned owl that had been misidentified.

Since both owls have yellow eyes and ear-like feather tufts, this confusion is somewhat understandable until you get out a ruler.

With a wingspan of 36 to 42 inches and a length of thirteen to sixteen inches, the long-eared owl is considered a medium-sized owl.

By comparison, the horned owl has a foot bigger wingspan and easily stands half-a-foot taller. Finally, the horned owl weighs over five times as much as the long-eared, that tips the scales at a mere nine ounces.

The long-eared owl has a tawny-orange facial disk marked with a broad, black vertical stripe through each eye. It is the slimmest North American owl.

When flying, the long-eared owl's slight weight and long wings results in a buoyant flight pattern that reminds some of a giant moth.

When this "moth" lands, spotting it can be quite the challenge.

### Small to X-large

Many species of owls are cryptically colored making them difficult to see against a tree trunk or in a clump of dried leaves. When hiding from view, the long-eared owl is second to none in assuming a camouflaged pose (see drawing on p.2).

Here is a description of one such concealed owl courtesy of A.D. DuBois, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century observer.

*I suddenly found myself gazing at a strange object in front of me.... Soon I realized it was an owl, standing upright and rigid, stretched vertically to its utmost, its girth contracted to an incredible degree. It seemed much more like a piece of broken tree branch than a living creature. It appeared perfectly cylindrical, very long, and small....*

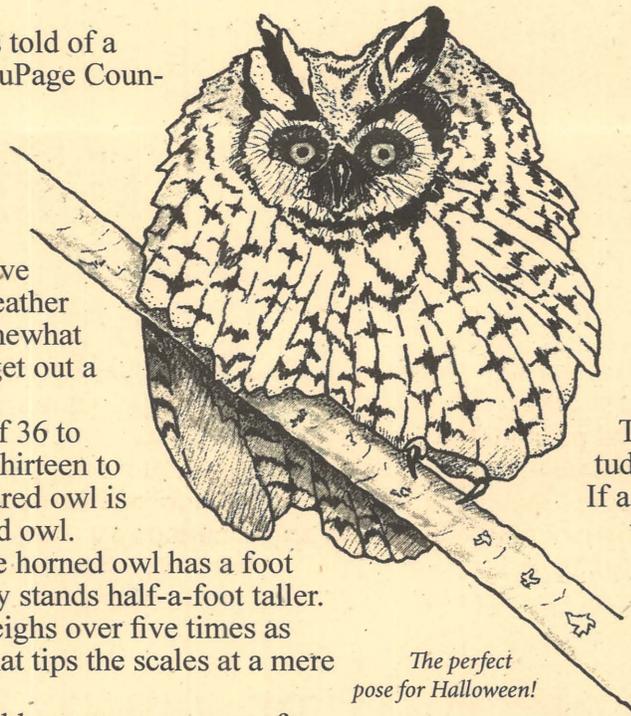
*No color was visible except the yellow of the eyes, which gazed at me fixedly. It was a most remarkable protective attitude.*

This is not the only "protective attitude" at a long-eared owl's disposal. If a long-eared owl feels threatened, it will puff up its feathers to appear large and fearsome (see illustration).

This time let's hear what William Brewster wrote in 1925 about meeting a defensive long-eared owl.

He describes a mother owl spreading out both wings with the top surfaces turned towards him. Brewster continues:

*...they formed what appeared to be a large, erect, circular fan of evenly-spaced feathers completely surrounding the head and body of the bird. Standing thus with threatening mien and menacing, swaying movements of the head, she looked like*



*The perfect pose for Halloween!*

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*some impish, malformed creature half beside itself with rage.*

Wouldn't you think twice about messing with this tough looking long-eared owl! Other types of owls can make similar feather adjustments.

### **A Double Life**

It is common to place a bird in a particular habitat such as a prairie chicken in a prairie or a spotted owl in an old-growth forest. The long-eared owl defies such habitat categorization.

Like other owls, the long-eared lays eggs in abandoned stick nests built by other animals such as crows, squirrels, or hawks.

The nests they use are located in dense vegetation such as a close-packed conifer forest or a thicket of riparian (lake and river borders) trees and shrubs.

Ideally, the nest site should be near an open grassland or shrubland because that's where long-eared owls prefer hunting.

What does it hunt? That depends on where the bird is located. The long-eared owl can be found across N. America, Eurasia, and northern Africa.

Jim Duncan reviewed over 300 scientific publications about this owl's diet and tallied 470 species of prey including 180 mammals, 191 birds, 83 invertebrates, 15 reptiles, and 7 amphibians. Around here, the top item on the long-eared owl's diet is mice.

*No owl "goes skinny" better than a long-eared owl.*

### **An Illinois Rarity**

Late last century, it was listed as an endangered bird in Illinois. Today it is no longer listed as endangered because, as far as we know, it doesn't breed anywhere in Illinois anymore.

Before being extirpated, there once was a sizable population of resident long-eared owls in Illinois. "Loss of habitat" is given as an explanation for their disappearance but I can't help but wonder which habitat? Forest or grassland?

A Czechoslovakian researcher found that long-eared owls heavily used an "intensively exploited agricultural area" to hunt voles (meadow mice).

Furthermore they were hunting from artificial T-shaped perches installed in the alfalfa fields so that raptors could more easily avail themselves of the crop-eating rodents.

Back on this continent, renowned Canadian bird bander C. Stuart Houston was working on a 50-year great horned owl study. During his research, he had opportunities to band over 300 long-eared owls. Thirty-five percent were banded during just two years.

Why? During those two years swaths of grain crops got buried under snow. The grain, not surpris-

ingly, attracted mice and the mice pulled in the owls which brings up two points.

First, given their opportunistic diet and their ability to utilize agricultural fields, loss of hunting habitat is probably not as key as loss of nesting habitat.

Second, where did all those long-eared owls come from that Houston banded in just two years? He speculated that this might be evidence of nomadism in the species.

### **On the Move**

Nomadism, you ask? Some birds reside here all year like great horned owls. Other birds, like swallows, migrate here for the summer.

Unlike migration that occurs on a seasonal basis, nomadism involves changing territories in an erratic or inconsistent pattern. Suffice it to say, there is still much to learn about the movements of long-eared owls.

By and large, they migrate at night at heights of 100 to 165 feet. These owls favor the same conditions preferred by migratory hawks: cold fronts with light westerly winds. Some populations of long-eared owls do *not* migrate.

Once again, the long-eared owl is not easily pigeon-holed, so to speak. The species is probably best described as a partial migrant.

### **Parliament is in Session**

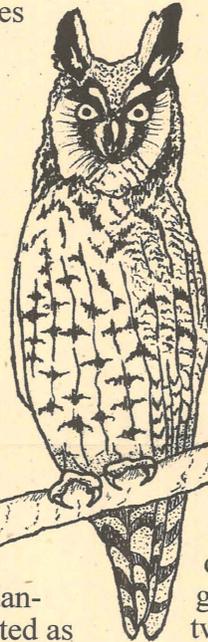
It winters in various locations including here in northern Illinois. Unlike most other raptors, long-eared owls will roost as a group. The winter roost usually includes fewer than twenty birds perched from two to sixteen feet off the ground. Conifers and dense thickets are used by these wintering raptors. Given that owls are thought to be wise, it is not surprising to learn that an old-fashioned term for a group is "a parliament of owls."

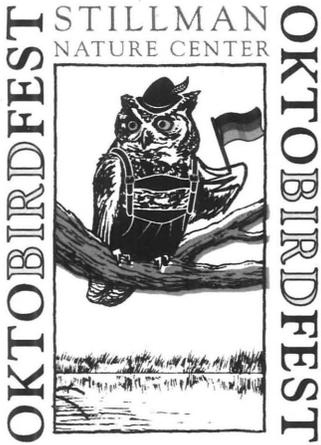
### **Closing the Circle**

When I received my first state and federal permits to keep a raptor, I started with just one bird, a long-eared owl.

I am as enthralled with Stillman's current long-eared owl as I was with that first one. After all, the enigmatic long-eared *is* "the archetypal owl."

*Please note that the Stillman Nature Center is also available, by reservation, during the week to school classes. Also, we can bring our raptors to your meeting place. For more information just call, email, or visit our website: [stillmann.org](http://stillmann.org).*





# Welcome to OktoBIRDFest!

During weekends in October, Stillman will host four different bird activities. From our Big Sit to the ever-popular Raptor Sunday, there will be something for bird students of all ages. So, depending on the day, bring your binoculars, camera, or just your curiosity and our expert guides will help you celebrate Stillman's fifth annual OcktoBIRDFest!

## THE BIG SIT

We're happy to once again host the "Lazy Birder's" field trip. No walking is required. We will sit by the lake and let the birds come to us.

Date: Saturday, Oct. 1  
 Time: 3:00PM until sunset  
 Age: 10 years and up  
 Fee: None



*Hermit thrush photo by Karen Lund.*

## BIRD BANDING OPEN HOUSE

Watch Mark Spreyer (a licensed bird bander) measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Catching birds is not always predictable, so come prepared to hike the trails. If it's raining, the activity will be cancelled. Did you know the German ornithologist Johannes Thienemann pioneered bird banding and established the world's first bird observatory?



*Banded warbler photo by Karen Lund.*

Date: Sunday, Oct. 2  
 Time: 9:00AM to Noon  
 Fee: None

## SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALK

Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does.

Those who join us for this walk wearing lederhosen will receive a year's free membership to Stillman nature center.

Date: Sunday, Oct. 9  
 Time: 8:00AM  
 Fee: None  
 Age: 10 years and up



*Osprey photo by Kristi Overgaard.*

## DON'T MISS RAPTOR SUNDAY!

Now's your chance to meet the long-eared, barred, barn, and screech owls. Stillman staff will also present a peregrine falcon, broad-winged



*Long-eared owl photo by Dan Simpson.*

hawk, and red-shouldered hawk. We will bring the birds out so you can see them up close. Kids will have a chance to dissect owl pellets. Bring a camera and a friend! Drop by anytime between 1:00 and 3:00 in the afternoon.

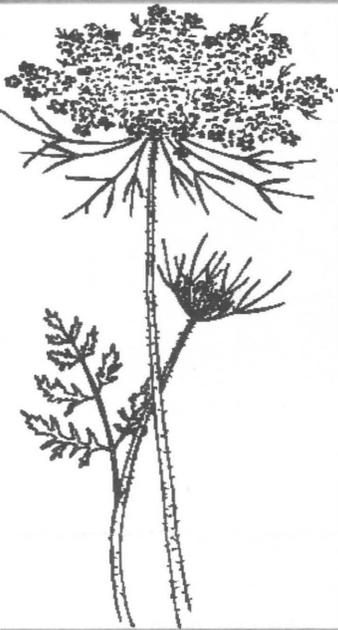
Date: Sunday, Oct. 16  
 Time: 1:00 - 3:00 PM  
 Fee: \$10/car

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GIFT!**



MARK F. SPREYER

NATURAL DIGRESSIONS



## NATURAL DIGRESSIONS

A NATURAL HISTORY FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

MARK F. SPREYER

*Which common local bird did Mozart keep as a pet?*

*Did you know that fireflies are carnivores?*

*Do you know which woodland flower can change its gender?*

*Which local tree has fruit that look like green brains?*

*Which owl makes hawks nervous?*

*Are there left-handed and right-handed snails?*

These and other questions are answered in the pages of *Natural Digressions* by award-winning naturalist, Mark Spreyer. The book includes 38 essays, color photos, line drawings by Gillian Kohler, and cartoons by Jessica Rolczynski.

**\$20 donation per book**

All proceeds go to Stillman Nature Center.  
+ \$3 for shipping

## BOOK ORDER FORM

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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## PROGRAMS

**Program Basics:** PLEASE CALL OR FAX US AT 847-428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@wildblue.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than five people have called two days prior to a program, the activity could be cancelled. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

### SOLAR OBSERVING ON SUNDAY

Join the Northwest Suburban Astronomers and observe our nearest star with special telescopes and filters. See sunspots and solar prominences in remarkable detail! This will be a fun and safe activity for the entire family. If you like, bring a dish and join us for a potluck picnic. Remember to call Stillman at (847) 428-OWLS and let us know if you're coming. If the weather is iffy, call Stillman for an update before making the trip.

Date: Sunday, Aug. 28  
Time: Noon - 3:00PM

### THURSDAY TREKKERS

Join us outside for a healthy hour-long walk around a lake, through the woods, and who knows where else? Why not add Stillman to your list of exercise options? Come prepared to hike the trails with hiking boots or sturdy shoes.

Dates: Thursdays, Sept. 1, Oct. 6,  
Nov. 3, Dec. 1  
Time: 9:30AM  
Fee: None



### BIRD BANDING OPEN HOUSE

Watch Mark Spreyer (a licensed bird bander) measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Catching birds is not always predictable, so come prepared to hike the trails. If it's raining, the activity will be cancelled.

Date: Sunday, Sept. 4 & Oct. 2  
Time: 9:00AM to Noon  
Fee: None



### SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALKS

Mark Spreyer and Mike Levin will lead a morning bird walk. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does.

Date: Sundays, Sept. 11 & Oct. 9

Time: 8:00AM  
Fee: None

### BATS by the CAMPFIRE

Ever wonder about these creatures that come out at night? Bats that is. Why are they so mysterious? Do they really drink blood and get caught in your hair? Join us for a fun campfire while learning about these misunderstood creatures. We'll dispel some myths and discuss how essential they are to our environment.



Join us for bat information and roasted marshmallows. Say goodbye to summer and listen for the sounds of nocturnal wildlife. Speaking of which, we'll end the evening with a visit to our resident owls.

Date: Friday, Sept. 17  
Time: 7:00 - 8:00 PM  
Suggested Donation: \$2.00

### TREE I.D. OR THIS BUD'S FOR YOU!

As the leaves turn color, join Stillman's naturalist as he shows you how to identify some of our Midwestern trees. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will inspire you to open your own "branch office." Come prepared to be out in the weather.



Date: Sunday, Sept. 25  
Time: 2:00PM  
Fee: None

### SPECIAL VOLUNTEERS AND MEMBERS EVENT

We have two new owls, a long-eared and a barn owl. If you haven't seen them yet, now's the time to take a look.

We'll provide the main course and beverages. We'd like you to bring along a side dish. ALL of Stillman's members, friends, volunteers and their families are invited. We'd love to see you and introduce you to our new birds of prey.

Please do call or email to let us know if you plan to attend and what kind of dish you'll be bringing.

Date: Sunday, Oct. 2  
Time: 4:00PM - sunset

### GRAPEVINE TREE CENTERPIECE

Susan Kowall will help you design a centerpiece or seasonal decoration featuring colorful products from Mother Nature.

Date: Thursday, Nov. 3  
Time: 11:30AM - 1:00PM  
Member's Fee: 1 free decoration  
Non-Member's Fee: \$5.00/decoration

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BOARD MEMBERS

Susan Allman, President • Jim Kaltsas, Vice President • Mike Levin, Treasurer  
Kristi Overgaard, Secretary • Eva Combs • Joy Sweet • Karen Lund  
Nat Bilsky • Yvette James • Doug Saylor • Sue Kowall

Mark Spreyer, Director & Newsletter Editor  
Gillian Kohler, Newsletter Illustrator  
Meg Ewen, Webmaster

*If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.*

Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.

You can also join online, just visit [stillmannc.org](http://stillmannc.org) and click on "Become a Member or Volunteer." Volunteer opportunities include teaching classes, clearing trails, and fundraising.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

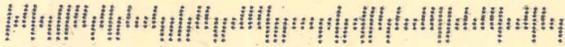
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Please mail with your check to:

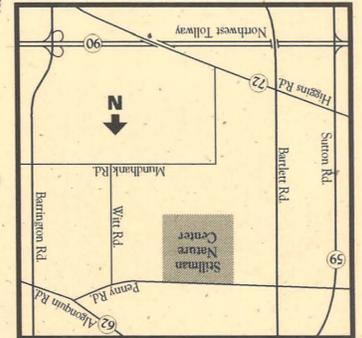
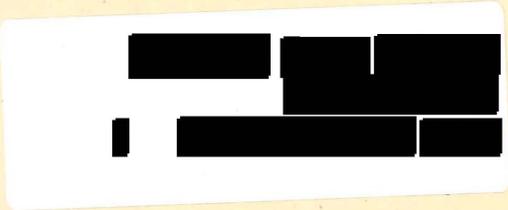
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*Thank you for your donation.*



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