Jessica Crowley

A Finger of Owls

Julia Corbett

I awoke in darkness to the smell of smoke blowing in through open windows. There is no smell as disconcerting and discomposing of sleep when you live in the woods in a wooden structure. Winter mountain snows were paltry and we pinned our hopes on raucous spring storms that never came. Now in June, a fire in full fury burns in record heat and rock-bottom humidity about fourteen miles south of my cabin. In what is typically the lushest month, the meadow grass is browning, holding on, quickly trying to make seed. The midday sun casts a rosy-orange glow on every surface. Smoky sunsets smolder across the horizon. Bits of ash float by the windows, resembling small gray bugs, flitting up, floating down, briefly up, then again down.

Officials tell us to get used to this – a warming, burning West. My neighbors and I realize that fires are an expected risk – though never a welcome one – for the privilege of living in the woods. But we never bargained for a drastically and abnormally warming planet. The warming temperatures, in addition to shrinking snow pack and soil moisture, have created severe stress for the trees and good homes for beetles – pine beetle, spruce beetle, fir beetle. They burrow through bark and lay eggs that feast when they hatch. Within a year, the needles start to turn red-brown, and by the next year, the entire tree is clothed in red, like a torch ready to burn. An added consequence of warming temps is that some beetle species now complete their life cycles in one year rather than two, essentially doubling their population.

Though I have lived here just six seasons, I know the symphony of Wyoming summer – when the aspen leaf out, when I spy the first western tanager, when the spring peepers fall silent, when the sandhill cranes fly south. It's painful to imagine this music and its choreography changed. Already, pikas, those sweet-faced rodents who squeak from alpine rock-fields at

passing hikers, are on the brink of extinction: There is no cooler, higher elevation for them to seek.

Bweak! Bweak! The call came from the western edge of the meadow. Shortly, another call came from the south. Bweak! Bweak! A strange and enchanting call – a bit like a pika or an unfamiliar rodent, but far too loud. It was five years ago and I was eating lunch outside in the warm, angled sun of late September, aspen leaves of butterscotch falling, warming on the ground. The call from the meadow repeated, high-pitched, insistent, and strong. A large, dark form gracefully – and utterly silently – glided past me. Owl. Nothing flies without disturbing air, or feathers, like an owl. It landed on a bare branch in a fir. A second owl flew near and perched in sunlight. A third owl called behind me, and after several minutes of round-robin calling, it joined the other two.

The field markings said "great gray" – large body, no visible ear tufts, a lovely round facial pattern, a mix of brown and gray – but the strange call didn't fit. I had heard great grays from the cabin during the black of night, the monotone hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo, low and deep. No embellishment, and certainly never at midday.

It's my enchantment and love for these elusive winged creatures that makes the vision of the slender finger of owls pulling up, retreating north, all the more terrifying.

A CD of birdcalls solved the mystery: Bweak! Bweak! The calls came from a juvenile great gray owl, the tallest North American owl with the longest wingspan (almost five feet), though it weighs only half as much as a great horned. Lemon yellow eyes in a facial disk of concentric circles, a black and white bow tie beneath the chin; calls at night, but often hunts at dawn and dusk; young cared for by female until four or five months old, when they begin to disperse. I had witnessed the owl equivalent of teenagers cruising the 'hood.'

The range map of great gray owls colors a large swath of Canada and other frozen lands. For the southernmost reaches of their range, a slender finger arcs down the spine of the Cascades and Sierra Nevadas, and a thumb curves down into western Wyoming, through Yellowstone and slightly beyond, pointing to exactly where I live each summer. Delicate fingers of owls.

I come from a family of owlers. In his youth in the Yakima valley of western Washington, my father had a saw-whet owl in addition to his trained falcons. One winter while tromping through the creek valley near our childhood home in Iowa, my older brother found a great horned owl frozen solid at the base of a tree, perhaps from starvation and frigid temperatures. He carried it home and convinced my parents to stuff it. It sat on top of the piano and became the silent critic when I practiced.

During graduate school, I volunteered as a naturalist for the Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota so I could see, hear, and best of all, touch owls. My charges couldn't be rehabilitated and returned to the wilds, whether from tangles with cars and wires or injury from assailants of unknown origin. I held on my gloved fist diminutive screech owls, lighter than nerf-balls, and the magnificent feathered spitfires, great horned owls. When I'd take an owl to a classroom or senior center, it didn't feel like holding a bird, but a wild spirit, a personality. On my gloved fist, the great horned owls would clack their bills, hiss, rock from foot to foot, and occasionally, hoot. Their taloned grasp was intense; for added measure, they would nip at my glove with formidable beaks. It was as if my demands in broad daylight were an insult, an affront to their very owl-ness. The barred owls – similar in size and markings to spotted owls, though far more common – were less intimidating and much lighter, though impressive in size. One barred would close his giant chocolate brown eyes when I smoothed the feathers on his crown, yet he too would hiss, clack, and promptly ignore me when returned to his flight pen. It was a gift to get close to these owls; it was another gift that the distance between us never closed. I never forgot they were owls.

At my cabin, I haven't encountered juvenile great grays again in the five years since, just adults. Once or twice on a summer evening walk through the woods, I get a sense of one perched and watching, and turn to witness its silent swoop through the pines. *Strix nebulosa*, an owl named for the latin word nebulosus, meaning misty or foggy. A phantom of the north that even experienced birders struggle to spot. At night, I fight sleep to listen to its somber lullaby, measured and unhurried, though sleep is the very entity it elicits. Once at sunrise, I watched one dive into the rodent-pocked meadow below the cabin, but come up empty-taloned. The owls seem unalarmed or at least mildly tolerant of my presence and conversations with them. On a cloudy morning in early fall, I crept fairly close to a great gray with my camera; it ruffled and roused its feathers, the sign of a relaxed bird, or at least a bird that thinks I merit little attention. All

the neighbors compare sightings, glad to hear of its presence somewhere near, announcing "I saw the owl yesterday," as though there is just one species that really counts. I've searched the surrounding woods, looking up for a scraggly stick nest at the top of a broken snag, and looking down for large pellet castings, but have found neither.

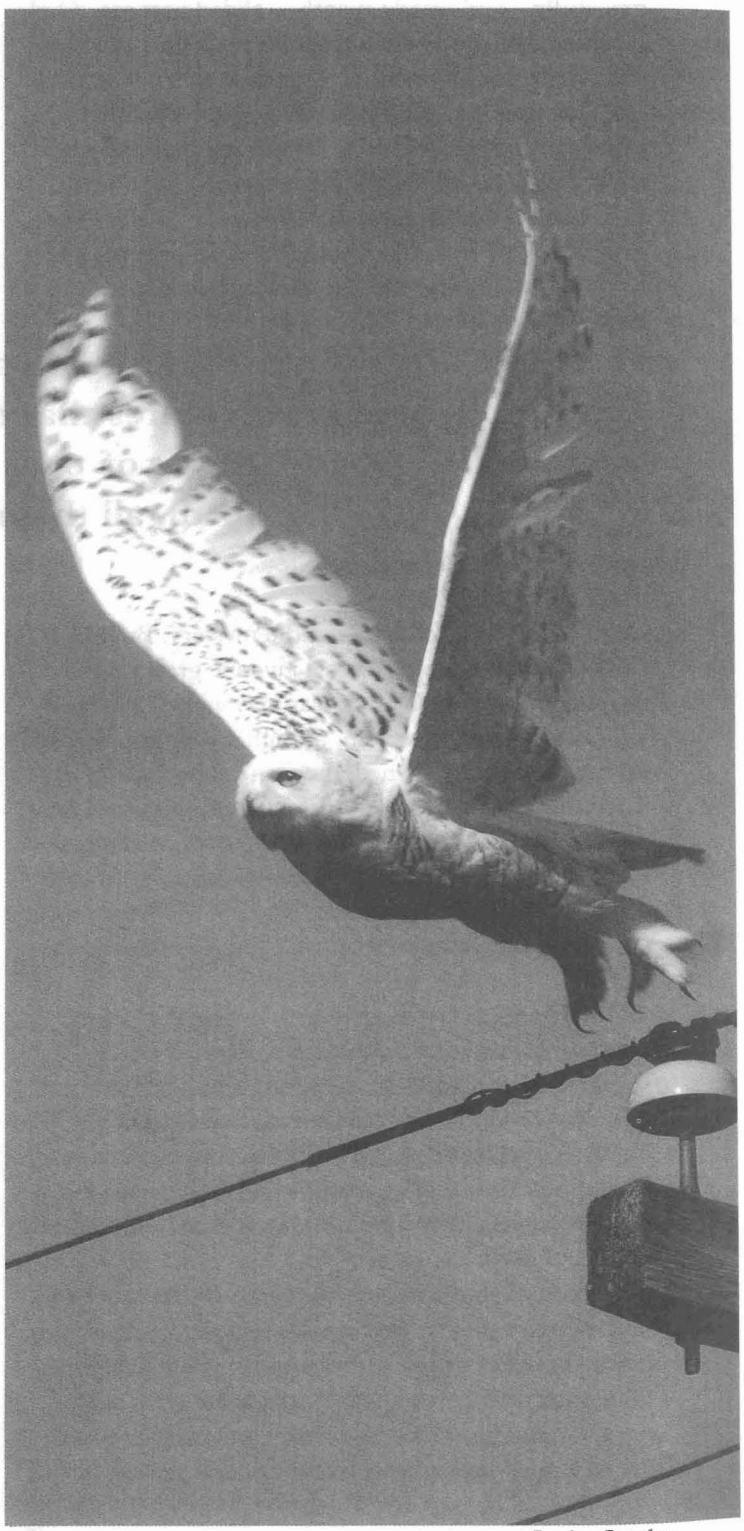
For many people who live in the woods, it's the large mammals that signify the place and whose images grace their cabin walls. Deer, elk, bear, moose. And I celebrate those encounters – a bull elk snorting across the meadow during mating season, a curious moose staring in the basement window and sending the cat hissing upstairs. But it's the great gray owls that most thrill me, that embody wild enigma and elegant ferocity.

It's my enchantment and love for these elusive winged creatures that makes the vision of the slender finger of owls pulling up, retreating north, all the more terrifying. Biologists have documented the fact that centuries-old patterns of migrations and bird habits are changing, morphing in response to a warming world, often moving north or upward in elevation and shifting their timing. Robins are returning to herald spring two weeks earlier. Many warbler species are flying an average of 65 miles farther north. And one of the most vulnerable ecosystems in a warming country is the alpine meadows of the Rocky Mountains.

If fire took my mountain cabin and woods, I would mourn profoundly, deeply. But compared to the owls, my options are many. Great gray owls don't pack their feathered bags and migrate, moving little if at all between winter and summer. In a fairly contained hunting ground, they catch mice, gophers, voles, and rabbits year-round, locating prey under the snowpack using auditory clues alone. They are perfectly adapted to boreal forests near open meadows where they have a principal role in a chorus of players and seasons. Meadow and mouse, ground squirrel and grass, fir and aspen, snow and wind. Other worlds are not now in their genes.

The smoke was thick again today, harsh on the throat and eyes, obscuring everything beyond the bottom of the meadow. Like living in an ashtray. My neighbors have their escape-bags packed and placed at the door, along with car keys and pet carriers. I have resisted – either from denial or hope – for what I could grab wouldn't be what's really valuable.

I tried to bring sleep by listening for owls, but heard only the breeze's crescendo, turning the aspen leaves on their stems. The dirge gathers momentum: the greenhouse gases that spurred the warming are worsening the fires that are contributing more and more gases, and the breezes carry gas and ash up and north, warming the sea ice. As sleep finally came, I envisioned wisps of wind, contrails of gas swirling over sagebrush plains, drawing up grouse feathers, tumbleweed seeds, and the dust of antelope dung. Ever northward they drifted, mingling ash with pine pollen, cottonwood fluff, and the down of new birds. Dancing north, ever north, ferrying owls on their wings, higher, higher, higher.



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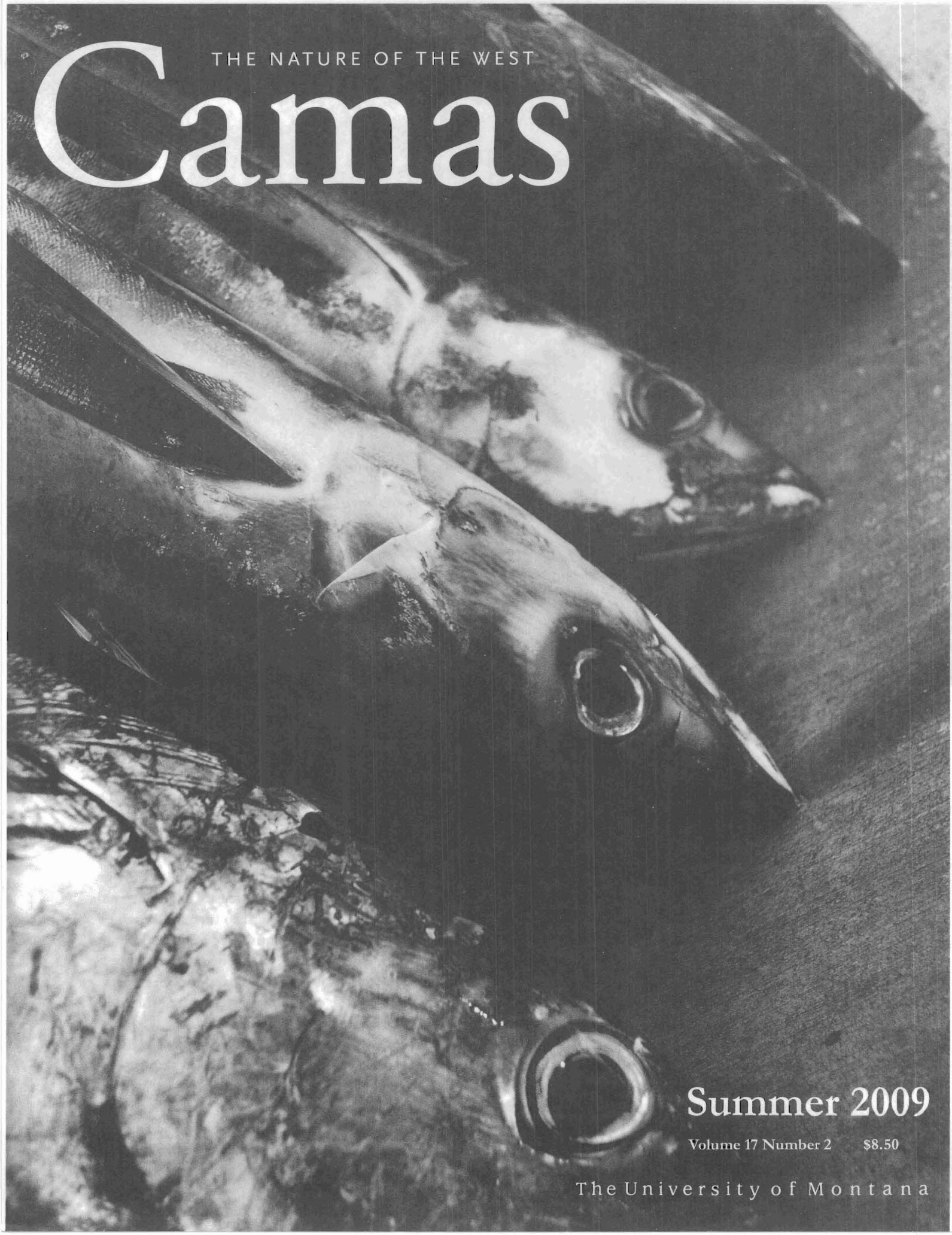

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