

## A Visit from our Neighbors to the North

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Greetings from Long Lake Conservation Center! The sun finally has some power to it and the Black Capped Chickadees around campus are responding with their territorial "*spring's here*" call. Perhaps they are a little early on their statement, but warmer days are ahead. Before you unzip those Carhartts and roll out that grill, there is still great winter fun to be had: owl watching. Here in Aitkin County, Great Horned and Barred owls reside year round. Common even in parks and neighborhoods, these owls are primarily nocturnal, but can often be located by their nightly "hooting". Long Lake staff members have been lucky enough to hear both species right on campus!

Their relatives to the north also occasionally pay us a visit. The Snowy, Great Gray, and Northern Hawk Owls dwell in Canada most of the year, but journey into northern Minnesota during the winter months, especially if their food supply has become scarce. In the winter of 2004-2005, hundreds of these Canadian Owls, particularly Great Grays, descended upon the state making for an exceptional sight, as well as some unfortunate road kill incidents.

These "invasions" occur every 5-10 years, cycling with the Canadian rodent populations. Though this winter hasn't touched the magnitude of '04-05, there has been an increase of owl sightings, particularly in Northern Hawk Owls. The Minnesota Ornithologist's Union has reported 72 Northern Hawk Owl sightings to date, many of them right in Aitkin County.

These magnificent birds tout a wingspan of 28 inches, but weigh less than a pound. Unlike Great Horned and Barred owls, Northern Hawk Owls are active during the day, making for easier viewing opportunities. White and black in color, these owls can be distinguished from other birds of prey by their white face, barred under-parts, thick feathers, and long tail. Preying on primarily small mammals, they can often be found perching on top of tall trees or on telephone wires adjacent to woods with open areas nearby. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, they can see prey a half mile away and can find and seize prey under one foot of snow.

Many of these Canadian owls will stay in the area until snow melt. With 54% of Aitkin County publicly owned, plenty of opportunities await for viewing these infrequent visitors. If you do decide to search for them, remember to refrain from knowingly hassling any birds and avoid flushing them as much as possible. They are truly a sight to enjoy!