THE CELEBRATED SPOTTED OWL OF THE STONYFORD RANGER DISTRICT

 OR

 THE GREAT SPOTTED OWL RODEO ON THE STONYFORD RANGER DISTRICT

 by Steve Gaddini

 Mendocino National Forest

"Another four hours of strenuous, fruitless brush thrashing in search of the

quasi ‑ mythical Spotted Owl...". I thought as my boss and I pulled on our

well worn cruiser's vests and packaged our reluctant cargo of squeaking,

malodorous rodents for travel. It was a fine, warm late August day, and at

long last, the final hooting expedition of the season.

I had been on Spotted Owl inventory and monitoring duty since reporting to work

in late May, meaning a long summer of week long campouts, canned ravioli's,

black coffee and visine nights, and daytime treks over 100% slopes festooned

with poison oak and whitethorn, my vest bulging with canteens, maps, outing

forms, altimeter, compass and various other sundries, as well as an odiferous,

quarrelsome quartet of mice as passengers. All season we patrolled timber

sales at ungodly hours, attempting to get any nearby Spotted Owls to respond to

our somewhat ludicrous imitations of their language, and, when an owl did,

indeed, respond to our calling we would set out the next morning on grueling

sojourns through the temperate zone jungles of the Stonyford district,

endeavoring to locate the elusive, much publicized *Strix occidentalis caurina*

and determine his age, gender, home accommodations and marital status, and

offer him a free rodent dinner for his time.

Hah! Never once had I seen an inkling of an owl. All season, all the long

marches had come up empty. Goose egg. Nada. The shale was loose, the brush

dense and the topography best suited to Spider Man. Every time we would return

from one of these day searches, feet would be sore, bodies sweaty, and

attitudes dubious. When we heard the owl responding in the canyon bottom, way,

way, way down, down, down, in the very ultimate bottom I was somewhat dismayed.

Four more hours of humping the boonies. Fighting the ever-present brush,

slipping, sliding, climbing and hooting, and for what? But oh well, at least

it was the last expedition of the season.

At last we were ready to begin our journey into the far reaches of the canyon

netherworld. I took a long pull at my canteen and shrugged. "Oh well, at

least downhill ain't all that bad.." Down we went, down through the

undergrowth and dog hair saplings, heading into the canyon on the bearing which

we heard last night's response. We were within thirty chains or so of the

bottom when I decided to give a hoot. I needed to blow the dust out of my

throat anyhow, and it would seem like the diligent thing to do. I cupped my

hands and cut loose with my best rendition of the patented, four note greeting

call of the Northern Spotted Owl.

My blood turned to ice water!! From just ahead, in a patch of mixed conifers

with a good hardwood understory came the unmistakable genuine greeting call of

the infamous flying dutchman himself, the Spotted Owl!! With my face ashen and

pale, I turned to my boss. He was looking at me with the anguished expression

of a man who has come home to find his house has been burglarized. "Pull

yourself together, chump!" I thought, as I lifted my quivering hands to my face

and produced another rather plaintive greeting hoot.

Bingo. Back came an answering hoot. Clear as crystal. I forced my frozen,

nerveless muscles to function and proceeded in the direction of the response,

doing my best Daniel Boone walk over the slash and dry leaves, attempting to

work our way in close enough to make visual contact. As we stalked in closer,

I kept hooting, and the owl kept responding. Abruptly, the responses to our

hooting ceased. We paused to catch our breath, and I happened to glance

upwards as I was removing my glasses to wipe the sweat from their lenses.

I froze!! There, perched on a limb perhaps forty feet away, approximately

fifteen feet off the ground, was the Spotted Owl, glaring down balefully at us

with his strangely mournful eyes. I felt, oddly enough, like a small boy who

has been caught red handed doing something he shouldn't have been doing. I

actually felt like the proverbial stranger in a strange land, as though I had

intruded into the domain of another where I had no business being. I stood

there gawking, entranced by the moment, and by the fulfillment of my long weeks

of searching.

Fortunately, my boss is a man of action. "Get a mouse...Get a mouse..." he

whispered in a snakelike hiss. I came back to reality and carefully shucked my

vest, ready to get back to the business at hand. I got out our mouse tether, a

piece of nylon fly fishing line with a small alligator clip affixed to the end,

and opened up the mouse cage.

"Well well well, you little wheezers, who goes first!" I chortled to myself as

I reached in to catch one of the smelly little beasts I had carried for so many

miles. The mouse squeaked and bit as I clamped the alligator clip onto his

neck and flung him out in view of the owl. I hurriedly wrapped my end of the

string around a fist sized rock to keep the mouse from escaping.

On silent wings the owl plummeted down upon the mouse, seizing it in his

talons, and flew to a nearby branch. That's when I realized what a true Maalox

moment this was going to be, for to my horror and chagrin, the owl had somehow

pulled loose the tether from the rock. I stared in helpless consternation as

the owl bolted down the mouse, the alligator clip, and perhaps a foot of the

nylon fly-fishing line. Then he sat there, staring at us with the expression of

a young sprout who has just had his favorite water pistol confiscated. My boss

kept repeating, in a low whisper, "he ate the #@%&\*+ string, he ate the

S#@&%\*S@ string!!" While were reasonably sure the bird would eventually

regurgitate the non‑digestible clip and string, we were deathly scared that he

might entangle the four feet of trailing line on a limb someplace and strangle

himself. We would be guilty of owl murder...

I felt crushed and utterly defeated. Here I had been so anxious to finally get

the chance to do what I had been trying to do all summer and I had botched the

job so badly that a federally listed threatened species now sat staring at us

with a metal alligator clip in his stomach and four feet of fly line dangling

from his beak like a long strand of spaghetti. My spirits were very, very low

just then as I contemplated how untenable the situation had become.

My boss was sitting there watching the owl and said glumly "Man we're going to

be in Time magazine if this bird croaks on us now...". I was appalled. Having

to live with myself would be bad enough, but being nationally vilified for my

faux pas would be the end of my existence.

For two of the longest hours of my life we watched the owl. We offered

additional mice. He wasn't interested. He sat there, watching us and trying

his best to bite off the fly line, but the tough nylon was too strong. As I

watched him, I thought of what a sad, lonely figure this small bird was. In

the midst of all the talk of the Spotted Owl and its impact on society, I had

never really thought about the bird itself. He seemed so dignified, so

perfectly suited to his canyon home. As he struggled with the bothersome

string, he peered down at us somberly, with the visage of a physician who must

tell a man he is terminally ill with an incurable disease. Then it came to me.

A forestry technician has to do what a forestry technician has to do.

"We've got to catch that bird and try to cut the string loose" I said. My boss

looked at me like a scientist who is examining a live culture of a particularly

loathsome plague organism. "Your call man...." he muttered incredulously as I

went into action.

My plan was simple. I would get a long stick, entangle the loose end of the

Fly line, and pull the bird to the ground where we could cut the line as close

to its mouth as possible. I have never moved more carefully than I did that

late August afternoon as I attempted to do what few men if any have attempted:

the live capture of a Northern Spotted Owl.

With painstaking care not to frighten the owl I gingerly reached for the

dangling tether. As I extended the stick, the owl gazed down into my face, and

our eyes locked together momentarily. There is a sense of enormous age in

their faces, as though they have seen the rise and fall of empires and

mountains, as though they realize the insignificance of mankind and know that

before there were men, there were owls, and that they will be here long after

we are gone. I will never forget the way he looked or the feelings I felt at

that moment. The moment when I tangled the fly line on that stick will be with

me forever. At last, I thought I had the line securely ensnared.

I tugged gently on the stick, and down the bird came, as though he knew what I

wanted to do. He spread his wings and floated to the forest floor. I pounced,

pinning the owl's wings to his sides so he couldn't injure himself. In a

twinkling, my boss pulled his knife and cut the string as close to the owls

beak as possible. We had done it! We had captured and administered first aid

to a Northern Spotted Owl. We stood there a second or two, looking at the owl

which I held in my hands. Time seemed to stop for a while, as though we were

all alone in the world, my boss, the owl, and me.

I set the owl free, and he quickly flew to the lowest boughs of a towering

Douglas Fir, and glanced down at us with a look of curiosity and wonder, then

he was gone, winging his way on silent pinions down into the vastness of the

canyonlands. That is how I wish to remember him, wafting away into the

distance, continuing on with his affairs as we began the long hike back to our truck.

Somehow, the walk back didn't seem to take so long, and as we headed back to our

campsite, I hoped I would see him again someday, and wondered how one late August

afternoon in 1990 would forever influence the rest of my tomorrows.