

United States | Home to a dozen species, the Mission Valley is the place to go to see wild owls up close.

By Gary Walther

I have three different species on the tree in my yard," the chatty receptionist at Ninepipes Lodge tells me, upon hearing that I've come to Montana's Mission Valley to write about owls. In New York City, my home, just one roosting owl would draw crowds and a vast social-media debris field, but her matter-of-fact tone reflects the fact that Montana has more species of owl than any other state.

However, it is the Mission Valley, an hour north of Missoula, that is owl Shangri-La. Eleven species breed here and, in the winters of 2013 and 2014, the valley hosted 15 to 20 visiting snowy owls from the Arctic, an event ornithologists call an "irruption".

Throughout history owls have been regarded as omens, often bad, but the next morning I take the big owl coasting silently across Route 93 in front of Ninepipes as a good sign. It lights on a low, muscular tree bough, looking back at me, almost two feet of glaring self-composure.

"A great horned, I'm sure," says Denver Holt later over coffee at the lodge. Of course, he's sure: Holt is one of the world's leading owl researchers and the reason I've come. "He's Mr Owl," John W Fitzpatrick, director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the world's leading bird research institute, told me before the trip. "If we have a question about owls, Denver's our go-to guy."

Holt is indeed a rare species, an independent field researcher in a world in which wildlife research means affiliation with a university, a government agency or a non-profit. (He's surely the only field researcher whose original ambition was to become a professional football kicker.) He's also that classic American type, the pioneer. In the mid-1980s, frustrated with being a middle-level wildlife manager in his native Massachusetts, he quit and returned to

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Montana, where he'd studied history at university (but with an "unofficial second major in wildlife," he says).

In Mission Valley's abundant owls, Holt found his ornithological frontier. Few had studied the species (and then mostly in the short term), because owls are hard to study. Most are nocturnal, difficult to find even if diurnal and, in the US, primarily accessible in the short breeding and nesting period (March to June). Owls are the perfect species for a man who loves accumulating field data, and who has a deep distrust of received wisdom. With owls, there was little of either. "I still probably say 'I don't know' more than anything," Holt says — exactly his response when I asked what caused the snowy owl irruptions.

In 1987 Holt founded the Owl Research Institute, a covey of farm buildings sheltered by willow and cottonwood trees 15 minutes from Ninepipes Lodge, near the village of Charlo. It's open to visitors by appointment, but Holt also runs owl field trips through his own company, Wild Planet Nature Tours, and others including Victor Emanuel Nature Tours.

As we drive towards the institute, the crunch of tyres on gravel flushes out a great horned owl, who swoops across the lawn and into a willow brake. ("When I pulled up here the first time, thinking to buy it, there were two great



Montana's talon show

From top: a snowy owl in flight in Mission Valley; Gary Walther with a long-eared owl; field researcher and biologist Denver Holt on an owl pursuit; the peaks of the Mission Range

Daniel J Cox/naturexposures.com; Alizabeth Bronsdon



horned owls sitting in that tree," Holt says.) We pursue the bird, and I madly pan the trees, but the binoculars only flatten the branches into a two-dimensional scrawl.

"There he is," says Holt quietly, spotting the bird with the naked eye. It's 40ft up, impassive yellow eyes boring into us, then it turns its head 180 degrees to scan the field on the other side of the willows. (Owls can turn their heads 270 degrees, courtesy of 14 neck vertebrae — we have seven.)

Later, on a back road called Back Road, we stop the car beside some farmland. To my eye, it looks like any other field but Holt points out that the farmer lets the grass get a bit high, a perfect habitat for voles, which to many owl species (especially short-eareds) is foie gras. In March, visitors often see the short-eareds' courtship dance here — tight turns and hoots by the male, punctuated by dives during which he claps his wingtips together beneath his body.

The Mission Valley is also one of the great raptor wintering grounds in North America, and that's evident on Back Road. Every other telephone pole has a red-tailed hawk sitting sentry, we scare up a sharp-shinned hawk, and out there on a fence post is a bald eagle, an easy naked-eye identification even at 200 yards, because of the white head-feathers ablaze in the sun.

We drive up to Polson at the top of the Valley, a resort town at the southern end of vast Flathead Lake (27 miles long, 15 miles wide). Holt turns off Route 93 and heads to Polson Hill, a cluster of newer houses perched on a glacial moraine above the town. In the recent snowy owl irruptions, the birds descended on this neighbourhood "because it's so miserably cold up here," Holt speculates with a laugh. "That green house over there," he says, referring to a property on Skyline



Drive, "for some reason was a roost they particularly liked."

Looking for owls with Holt is a safari along the Mission Valley. We canvass hawthorne brakes and woody draws for long-eared owls, and grasslands for short-eareds. Holt sets up the scope to peer (vainly, it turns out, but that's part of an owl pursuit) at forest edges for the tiny pygmy owl, "gram for gram the baddest owl out there," he says, referring to its appetite for other birds.

Even without its birds, the valley is a dramatic place to visit. The knife-edge peaks of the Mission Range rise abruptly from the eastern valley floor — "As spectacular as Jackson Hole," says Victor Emanuel, founder of the Texas-based company that has been running birding tours here for 40 years. On the western side are the undulating Moiese Hills, a deposit left by Glacial Lake Missoula, which covered the valley and extended into Idaho during the last Ice Age. In between, the valley floor is a pastoral tapestry of fields and grassland. The streambeds hold a raised stitching of hawthorne and willow trees, and the pastures and meadows are polka-dotted with small, wet depressions called kettles, the remnant of ice-blocks immured in the ground when the glaciers retreated. There are towns at rail crossings and isolated farms tucked neatly into the griddle of gravel roads: it's a landscape like a child's train set.

Besides tours, Holt is out there "constitency building for owls," as he calls it. His main tool is community nights, publicised in local papers, when he pulls in a forest or field with a trailer outfitted with nets, owl-recordings, and an exhibit of stuffed specimens, many left on his doorstep as road kill. He uses the exhibits, spread out on a folding table, to entertain the crowd, mostly families, while waiting for a wild owl to fly into one of the nets, attracted by recordings of its call. After a "strike", Holt retrieves the bird and brings it out for the visitors to see, before releasing it again. On a Tuesday night during my visit, a group

of 30 endure hours of chill to see several saw-whet owls up close. They are small enough to fit in a coffee mug — so small that few at the event would ever be likely to see one in the wild without Holt's help.

On my last day, Holt and his research assistant, Matt Larson, take me for an owl trapping-and-banding excursion south of Missoula, a spot where Holt has been conducting an owl census for more than 20 years. We crab-scuttle through the dense overlay of bowed branches and thorn tentacles, which I finally realise is not a morass but a myriad of owl hallways, doorways and chutes.

Holt issues instructions: "You take the berm over there, Gary. Matt, hang back and call out the owls that fly back."

It's a good morning. Long-eareds and short-eareds swirl up out of the brush, five, six, and finally 10. After an hour or so, Holt decides where to set the net. We've barely regrouped when there's a ping; we have our first long-eared owl.

"He may bite you, he may get his talons into you — you just have to take it," Larson tells me, as he prepares to hand me the bird so that he can weigh, measure, and band it. "Cry inside," is his cold chaser of advice.

I thread my ring finger between the owl's talons and wrap the rest of my hand firmly around both legs, as I've just been shown, and wonder, who's got whom here?

The owl makes one or two abrupt efforts to fly, then settles nicely into feathered dignity. Larson goes about his work with the efficiency of a coroner: measure the wing, the tail, examine trailing-edge feathers to determine age (this year or older is about as exact as you can get in the owl business), and pluck an undertail feather or two for a DNA sample. This last seems demeaning, but the bird takes it calmly.

Larson retakes the owl, but inexplicably, his grip isn't perfect. The bird drives its talons into the crease of his thumb and index finger, and I hear Larson taking his own stoic advice, emitting just a low hiss.

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The Owl Research Institute (owlinstitute.org) runs classes, conferences and birding tours. Denver Holt is also the co-owner of Wild Planet Nature Tours (wildplanetnaturetours.com) which offers tours in the Mission Valley and elsewhere. Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (ventbird.com) will run its next Montana Owl Workshop, led by Holt, from April 26 to May 1, from \$1,895 per person. Ninepipes (ninepipeslodge.com) has simple rooms from \$75 per night; Quinn's Hot Springs Resort (quinnshotspings.com) has log cabins from \$165 per night

Short cuts

US Boeing has completed construction of its first 737 MAX 8 aircraft (pictured), a new version of the long-established narrow-bodied jet, designed to offer 14 per cent more fuel efficiency than the best existing models. Thousands of employees gathered to see the plane rolled out from the company's paint hangar in Renton, Washington, last week. It is due to make its first test flight in the new year, with the first delivery to "launch customer" Southwest Airlines scheduled for late 2017 — 50 years after the first 737 flew. The MAX 8 is the first in a fourth generation of the aircraft,

which includes the MAX 7, 9 and 200; Boeing has already won 2,955 orders across the four models. Despite various advances, the plane uses a conventional metal body, rather than a composite one, as in the 787. Improved fuel efficiency is mainly delivered by new engines and drag-reducing twin-tipped winglets, which are manufactured on the Isle of Wight, off England's south coast. Meanwhile, Boeing's arch rival Airbus is expected to deliver its first A320neo — the 737 Max's direct competitor — to its launch customer, Qatar Airways, next month. boeing.com

The Marktgasse hotel, Zurich



Switzerland One of Zurich's oldest inns has reopened after a two-year renovation as a slick boutique hotel. Housed in a building that dates back to the 13th century, the Marktgasse sits among the cobbled streets of the city's old town. Beat Curti, a Swiss retail and media entrepreneur, acquired the building in 2004 and has turned it into a 39-bedroom hotel with two restaurants and a bar. Ancient stucco work, panelling and columns have been protected, alongside

a modern, Scandinavian-inspired design scheme. Doubles from CHF274 (£183); marktgasseehotel.ch

Spain Majorca has long been a popular training destination for professional cycle teams who come in search of mild winter weather, quiet



roads and abundant mountains. Now, British cyclist David Millar is offering the same experience to amateurs, on long-weekend training camps complete with mechanics, massages and support vehicles. Millar, who won stages of the Tour de France, Giro d'Italia and Vuelta a España, will lead the camps, giving pre-ride briefings each morning. The four-night camps will be held in April 2016, based at the Jumeirah Port Soller hotel, and cost £3,500 per person. jumeirah.com/mallorca

Tom Robbins