

Pygmy Owl Looks Like Gnome

Along the Trail

By Ken Legg

That little gnome of the owl family, the pygmy owl, used to be a Santa Cruz resident. He may still be, although I never saw him there. One ornithologist in a report on Santa Cruz birds mentions this tiny owl nesting in old cottonwoods or sycamores; or was it old pear trees? They should be old trees at any rate, for the pygmy nests in holes.

The head is plainly round, without ear tufts, in pygmies, and, as can be seen from the picture, the wing and tail feathers have white spots. This is one distinguishing character which helps identify him. When perched, the tail, which is longer than that of most owls in comparison to body length, projects upwards at an angle. This perky position of the tail is wren-like.

The flight of owls is usually silent and mothlike, these birds depending upon stealth to overtake their prey. The pygmy is unique among owls in that the wings make a distinct whistling sound. One perched on a fence post in front of my window. I watched him for quite some time. When he got ready to depart he launched downward and took off in rapid, almost buzzing flight similar to that of a shriek. This is quite un-owl-like.

There are other diurnal owls, the short-eared being one, but the pygmy is abroad commonly in daylight. He does some hunting during the day and may even be seen in bright sunlight. I suspect, however, that



The feathered little rascal pictured above was transplanted from Big Sur park to Santa Cruz for the photograph and then turned loose. Whether he stayed in the area appears

being out in the sun is the result of something having disturbed him.

The little guy in the picture I picked up in the middle of the road on a sunny day in Big Sur park. He was so friendly that I sat him on the car seat and transported him home. I then put him on a fence post and took his picture. He didn't harm me, but that bill and those claws look awfully sharp, and I wouldn't want to make him mad.

a moot question, but indications are that few of his brother pygmy owls remain in Santa Cruz county, although many of the species lived here in years gone by.

Small birds of the woodland have no use for this gnome-like character. One day I came across a congregation of wrens and other small birds flying excitedly in and out of a cypress tree, all the while fussing and calling until it seemed every bird in the neighborhood was present and angry. Peering into the tree, I saw a poor pygmy. He was the victim of mob violence. The smaller birds kept pestering him until he finally flew away.

Other birds have good reason to fear him, for a part of his food is avian species. Birds as large as robins, squirrels and other large rodents are killed and eaten by the pygmy owl. Insects, snakes and lizards are also prey items.

The heavier coniferous forests, as those around Big Sur, behind Carmel and Santa Cruz, are the homes of pygmies. The nest, however, is usually in deciduous trees as these afford the best natural cavities.

He is an unsuspecting little bird. His call is a soft, whistled "klook, klew." This may either be given singly or in a rapid succession of staccato notes. Many "bird men" decoy the pygmy by imitating the call, and the fact that the birds respond readily gives a hint of their unsuspecting nature.

The Indians were very superstitious and believed that killing a pygmy owl would bring terrible misfortune upon the slaver. I am not superstitious but believe all owls are important to us because they assist in keeping the prolific rodent population from overrunning the land.

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