

Bird Symbols of Canada

Part 5

Manitoba

Provincial Birds: Great Gray/Grey Owl (*Strix nebulosa*)

In 1987, under “The Coat of Arms, Emblems and Manitoba Tartan Act”, the Manitoba Legislature decided to adopt the Great Gray Owl as the Provincial bird. The exact text of the Act states:

“5(2) The bird ornithologically known as Strix nebulosa and commonly called the “Great Gray Owl” is adopted as and is the avian emblem of Manitoba.”¹

Nature North says about the Great Gray Owl:

“..... A rare bird, this species has been seen more regularly in parts of Manitoba than elsewhere in Canada. It is thus fitting that on July 16, 1987, by an Act of the Manitoba Legislature, the Great Gray Owl was officially named the Provincial Bird Emblem. Elevation of the status of the Great Gray Owl from unprotected in 1962 to provincial bird emblem in 1987, is in recognition of owls and other birds of prey as a valuable and treasured part of the natural world, and worthy of protection.”²

Nature North also goes on to say that the Great Gray Owl is larger than the Great Horned Owl (the Provincial bird of Alberta) and the Snowy Owl (the Provincial bird of Québec). The males and females of the species look the same, but as is common with birds of prey, the female is larger than the male: the male owl weighs up to 1.2 kg, whereas the female weighs up to 1.8 kg. The Great Gray Owl has bright yellow eyes and a broad round face, with marked white chin patches that are a key identifying characteristic of this bird.

The Canada Government website states that the Great Gray Owl is the largest owl in North America, with a wingspan of over 1.3-1.5 metres. The Great Gray Owl is a Manitoba resident all year round.³

The appearance of the Great Gray Owl on Canadian stamps unfortunately, is limited to the mini-sheet that Canada Post issued in 2017, as designed by illustrator Keith Martin in collaboration with Designer Mike Savage of Signal Designs Vancouver. In commenting on the artwork, Keith Martin remarked that:

“I was struck by the similarities between the three large birds of prey: the great gray owl, the gyrfalcon (Provincial bird of the Northwest Territories) and the osprey (Provincial bird of Nova Scotia),” says Martin. “I was fascinated by the subtleties in their wing feather patterns. Their nuances make each bird unique and beautiful.”⁴

¹ <https://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/c150e.php>

² http://www.naturenorth.com/Gray_Owl/Gray_Owl.html Nature North is Manitoba’s online nature magazine.

³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/provincial-territorial-symbols-canada/manitoba.html>

⁴

https://www.canadapost.ca/web/en/blogs/collecting/details.page?article=2017%2F08%2F01%2FBirds_of_canada&cat=stamps&cattype=collecting

The mini-sheet and stamps are illustrated below:

2017 Birds of Canada



2017 [Provincial] Birds of Canada



Image source: <https://www.canadapost.ca/>

eBird Canada describes the Great Gray Owl as follows:

“A large enigmatic owl of bogs, meadows, and coniferous forest. This rare and sought-after species is most often seen hunting around dawn and dusk, when it perches silently at the edges of clearings. Feeds mainly on voles. When vole populations crash, Great Grays can be found in large numbers south of their usual northern haunts, especially in winter. Yellow eyes and white bow-tie pattern on neck separate Great Gray from Barred. Its deep hoots are rarely heard.”⁵

In addition to North America, which is the primary location where you would expect to see Great Gray Owls, they are also present in parts of Europe, notably: Norway, Sweden and Finland; with some more limited presence in Poland, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia as well as Estonia and Latvia. According to Birdlife International, around 87 per cent of the global population is found in North America (some 60,000 mature birds) with the remaining 13 per cent (3,900 to 15,000 mature birds) located in Europe. From reviewing the Birdlife data zone, it is apparent that the estimates of the population size are very broad and tentative, provisionally in the range 50,000-99,999; but possibly much larger⁶.

There are plenty of stamps which feature the Great Gray Owl, but only a few of these are from countries which host this owl. So, the additional examples that I have included below are from those postal authorities of countries where you might reasonably expect to see this species:

2018 Norway



Image Source: <https://eordre.posten.no/> [Posten Norway]

I have included this stamp from Norway Posten because it is one of 12 bird watercolour stamps designed by artist Viggo Ree. I really like the artwork, but unfortunately, Posten is one of the postal authorities that has migrated to self-adhesives for most of its commemorative stamps, so each stamp comes with irregular cut backing sheets which irritate me more than I like the stamp itself.

⁵ <https://ebird.org/canada/species/grgowl>

⁶ <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/great-grey-owl-strix-nebulosa/text>

2005 Belarus [Belpost]



Image Source: <https://www.belpost.by/en/philately/catalog/2030>

Belpost issued this stamp as its bird of the year for 2005, on 31 March 2005.

1978 United States – Wildlife Conservation Set



Image source: www.stampworld.com

This stamp comes from a set of four owl stamps, with a different bird on each stamp. The fourth value is the Great Horned Owl, which is the Provincial bird of Alberta.

2003 Ukraine – Owls of Ukraine



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

This stamp is from a sheetlet of 12 (different) owls, on the subject "Owls of Ukraine".

There is a variety of other stamps featuring the Great Gray Owl, as can be seen on the www.birdtheme.org website. As indicated above, many of these are from countries outside the natural range of this species, including countries in the Caribbean, Pacific and on the African continent.