

PORTFOLIO: GREAT GREY OWL

Experience a prey's-eye view of the ultimate stealth

hunter through the lens of photographer JARI PELTOMÄKI. Words by Markku Hukkanen



SWOOPING LOW over the snow, a great grey owl is poised to snatch up a foraging rodent deep beneath the icy crust. The great grey has a skill that no other owl possesses – it can locate and catch its prey under deep snow cover through hearing alone. This is vital to the species' survival in the coniferous forests of northern Europe, Asia and North America, where snow hides its small rodent prey for almost half of the year.

At over 70cm tall and with a wingspan of 1.5m, the great grey is one of the world's largest owls.



A SILENT ATTACK ends with a great grey owl plucking a vole from beneath the snow. Such a successful hunt is the result of a combination of patience and stealth. First, the owl finds a suitable perch, such as a branch, barn roof, fence or even a power line overlooking a clearing or open fields at the forest edge. Then it sits and listens.

The owl's disc-like face channels sounds towards its ears so that it can detect the tiny sounds of rodents moving beneath up to half a metre of snow. The moment it hears something interesting, the owl sets off silently, almost floating over the snow with talons ready (*top left*).

Suddenly, it drops feet-first into the snow, breaking through the thin crust of ice that often forms in late winter (*middle left and right*). Its ice-pick talons close over the soft body of the vole (*bottom left*), and the owl heads back to a safe place to eat its prey.

Though hearing is the great grey owl's most important sense, it also has sharp eyes and can spot rodents on the surface from several hundred metres away.

The owl is active mainly between dusk and dawn. However, in winter, when prey becomes harder to catch, it may have to hunt in the daytime, providing unrivalled photo opportunities.



A FIELD VOLE about to disappear down a great grey owl's throat. Through the owl hunts a variety of small rodents, such as bank voles, water voles, tundra voles and forest lemmings, field voles make up the vast majority of its diet due to their abundance. Field vole populations are cyclical – there may be plenty of them one year, but very few the next – and this has a direct impact on great grey owl numbers. In order to breed successfully, the owl must wander through the forest, seeking areas with the densest vole populations.





◀ **A FEMALE GREAT** grey owl guards a three-week-old chick on the nest. The owl tends to set up home in old raptor nests or the tops of broken trees, if suitable. It favours abandoned goshawk nests, but may commandeer new nests by driving off their owners. The great grey's size and formidable appearance means it resembles the eagle owl, which sometimes preys on goshawks. The great grey may use the same nest for several years in a row, but usually breeds only in the years when vole populations are high. The owl lays three eggs on average, which hatch after 28 or 29 days' incubation.

▶ **THE MALE GREAT** grey owl (*right*) gives a freshly caught field vole to his mate before setting out to resume hunting. During the breeding season, the role of the male is to provide food while the female takes care of incubating the eggs and warming, feeding and guarding the nestlings against any threat. She even makes impressively aggressive displays towards humans who stray too close to her nest. The female begins hunting again once her offspring have fledged.



▶ **THIS YOUNG OWL** has left the nest. Great grey nestlings typically fledge at about four weeks old, before they can fly. As they explore the nest tree, they often fall to the forest floor, but their climbing skills are good enough for them to be able to clamber out of reach of terrestrial predators, such as foxes. The biggest threat to chicks is the goshawk, which gains revenge for having its nest stolen by snatching occasional owl chicks in lightning strikes through the forest. After the chicks fledge, the adults continue to provide them with food for several weeks until the youngsters have learned to fend for themselves.





◀ **DUSK DESCENDS** on the forest. It's high summer and this female owl is about to begin hunting. While the species benefits from areas of forest being opened up by logging (this encourages its field vole prey), it needs areas of dense forest such as this for breeding. Coniferous forests are widespread in the northern hemisphere and the owl is under no immediate threat, though global warming may bring changes even to these primeval woods. For now, adult great grey owls need only be on the alert for their natural predators: golden eagles and eagle owls.

MARKKU HUKKANEN is a biologist who has been studying the hawk and owl populations in Oulu, Finland, for several years. He has put up hundreds of nestboxes and built artificial nests that have been used by great greys.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER



JARI PELTOMÄKI is a Finnish wildlife photographer who specialises in birds. He has been a serious birdwatcher since 1977 and soon turned to photographing what he saw. He became a full-time photographer in 1997 and won the International Wild Bird Photographer title in 2004.

"The great grey owl is my favourite species," he says. "I am lucky enough to live in the Oulu area - the best place to see the owl in Finland. In good vole years, we have many pairs nesting in the area, and in some winters we see them hunting in open fields. This often happens when the owls are starving, either because vole numbers in the forest are low or because the snow cover is too thick, even for them. Sometimes they are forced to hunt in the daytime. When they do, they provide unique photo opportunities."

HOW HE DID IT

» To find out how Jari took these photos, turn to page 58.



THE LOCATION

Oulu is a city and province in western Finland near the Baltic Sea. The countryside is characterised by coniferous forests and wetlands along the Gulf of Bothnia, an arm of the Baltic sea that runs along Finland's west coast.