

## THE LITTLE OR ACADIAN OWL.

+VLULA ACADICA, *Gmel.*

PLATE XXXIII.—MALE AND FEMALE.

This lively and beautiful little Owl is found in almost every portion of the United States. I have observed it breeding in Louisiana, Kentucky, and along our Eastern States, as far as Maine, where, however, it becomes scarce, being, as it were, replaced by the Tengmalm Owl, which I have seen as far south as Bangor, in Maine. It is rare in the lower parts of South Carolina, where indeed my friend BACHMAN never observed it.

The Little Owl is known in Massachusetts by the name of the "Saw-whet," the sound of its love-notes bearing a great resemblance to the noise produced by filing the teeth of a large saw. These notes, when coming, as they frequently do, from the interior of a deep forest, produce a very peculiar effect on the traveller, who, not being aware of their real nature, expects, as he advances on his route, to meet with shelter under a saw-mill at no great distance. Until I shot the bird in the act, I had myself been more than once deceived in this manner. On one particular occasion, while walking near my saw-mill in Pennsylvania, to see that all was right there, I was much astonished to hear these sounds issuing from the interior of the grist-mill. The door having been locked, I had to go to my miller's house close by, to inquire if any one was at work in it. He, however, informed me that the sounds I had heard were merely the notes of what he called the Screech Owl, whose nest was close by, in a hollow tree, deserted by the Wood Ducks, a pair of which had been breeding there for several years in succession.

I have been thus particular in relating the above circumstance, from a desire to know if the European Little Owl (*Strix passerina*) emits the same curious sounds. The latter is said by several authors of eminence to lay only two white eggs, while I know, from my own observation, that ours has three, four, or five, and even sometimes six. The eggs are glossy-white, and of a short elliptical form, approaching to globular. It often takes the old nest of the Common Crow to breed in, and also lays in the hollows of trees a few feet above the ground. A nest of our Little Owl, which I found near the city of Natchez, was placed in the broken stump of a small decayed tree, not more than four feet from the ground. I was attracted to it by the snoring notes of the young, which sounded as if at a considerable elevation; and I was so misled by them that, had not my dog raised himself to smell at



the hole where the brood lay concealed, I might not have discovered them. In this instance the number was five. It was in the beginning of June, and the little things, which were almost ready to fly, looked exceedingly neat and beautiful. The Little Owl breeds more abundantly near the shores of the Atlantic than in the interior of the country, and is frequent in the swamps of the States of Maryland and New Jersey, during the whole year. Wherever I have found the young or the eggs placed in a hollow tree, they were merely deposited on the rotten particles of wood; and when in an old Crow's nest, the latter did not appear to have undergone any repair.

This species evinces a strong and curious propensity to visit the interior of our cities. I have known some caught alive in the Philadelphia Museum, as well as in that of Baltimore; and, whilst at Cincinnati, I had one brought to me which had been taken from the edge of a cradle, in which a child lay asleep, to the no small astonishment of the mother.

Being quite nocturnal, it shews great uneasiness when disturbed by day, and flies off in a hurried uncertain manner, throwing itself into the first covert it meets with, where it is not difficult to catch it, provided the necessary caution and silence be used. Towards dusk it becomes full of animation, flies swiftly, gliding, as it were, over the low grounds, like a little spectre, and pounces on small quadrupeds and birds with the quickness of thought. Its common cry at night resembles that of the European Scops Owl, but is more like the dull sounds of a whistle than that of Owls generally is.

My friend Mr. T. MACCULLOCH, jun., has favoured me with the following curious notice respecting this bird. "In the beginning of April, when the snow was still lying in large patches in the woods, although it had entirely disappeared from the clear lands, I went out with my gun one afternoon, expecting to obtain some of the small birds which remove to the north on the first approach of spring. Having wandered about four miles from home without meeting with any thing worthy of notice, I had almost determined to return, when my attention was arrested by a sound which at first seemed to me like the faint tones of a distant bell. The resemblance was so exceedingly strong that I believe the mistake would not have been detected, had not a slight variation in it induced me to listen more attentively, and mark the direction in which it seemed to come. With the view of ascertaining its origin if possible, I crossed an intervening farm, and striking into a dense spruce wood, directed my course towards the point from which it seemed to proceed. While listening to the singular note, the accounts which I had seen of the *Turdus tinniens* or Bell Bird of the southern portion of the continent forcibly recurred to my mind, and rendered me doubly eager to discover its source. This, however, I found to be no easy matter. After proceeding a considerable distance in the woods the sound became suddenly





*Little or Acadian Owl.*

*Common Mouse.*







sharp and shrill, and seemed so close behind me that I started involuntarily. Having carefully examined all the adjacent trees without success, I was about giving it up in despair, when the note which first attracted my attention seemed to come in the former direction. Before I had advanced many steps, the sound changed as before; at one moment it seemed behind me, the next upon the right hand, then upon the left, and then it resumed its former distant mellow tone. This occurred so often, that I was completely puzzled and tempted to give up the pursuit, but still the desire of finding out the origin of the sound urged me on. After proceeding a considerable distance farther, I found that the bell-like sound now came from the opposite direction, and seemed far beyond the spot where I first heard it. Retracing my steps I entered a small cleared spot, in the centre of which stood a black birch, whose dead and decayed top projected beyond a vigorous growth of fresh branches, by which its sides were clothed. As I seated myself upon a prostrate log, the shrill note was suddenly resumed, and from the direction of the sound I was convinced that it proceeded from the birch tree. Almost breathless with expectation, I carefully examined the tree from top to bottom, but the secret still remained concealed. Moving cautiously round, I examined the other side of the tree, but with no better success, until going to the root, and directing my eye along the trunk, I observed a small protuberance, which at first appeared to be a knot. Inspecting it more closely, however, I found it to be the head of the Little Grey Owl, protruded from a small aperture, which probably formed the entrance of its nest. Though standing directly beneath the bird, it did not seem to observe me, but continued to call for its mate. While watching the Owl, I observed with no little surprise that the sound which I thought came from a distance, as well as that which was near, actually proceeded from the same source. This singular power of altering the voice I have never found in any other bird, and to me it appeared analogous to that by which ventriloquists are able to make the voice seem near or remote. Having enjoyed the pleasing deception for some time, I left the little performer unmolested, feeling abundantly recompensed for my long tramp through mire and slush by the curious discovery. This was the only time I ever heard the note of this Owl. Frequently I have had it alive, but it was invariably silent, and, like the *Strix flammea*, would sometimes feign itself dead; and last winter I shot one which was placed upon its back in a scale, and handled a good deal, yet it shewed no signs of life until thrown into a box, when it started up, and looked about sharply enough."

In all parts of the United States where this species occurs it is a permanent resident.



LITTLE OWL, *Strix passerina*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. iv. p. 61.

STRIX ACADICA, Bonap. Syn., p. 38.

STRIX ACADICA, AMERICAN SPARROW OWL, Swains. and Rich. F. Bor. Amer., vol. ii. p. 97.

ACADIAN OWL, *Strix acadica*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 137.

LITTLE OR ACADIAN OWL, *Strix acadica*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. ii. p. 567; vol. v. p. 397.

General colour of upper part olivaceous brown; scapulars and some of the wing-coverts spotted with white; the first six primary quills obliquely barred with white; tail darker, with two narrow white bars; upper part of head streaked with greyish-white; disks pale yellowish-grey; ruff white, spotted with dusky. Lower parts whitish, the sides and breast marked with broad elongated patches of brownish-red.

Male,  $7\frac{1}{2}$ , 17. Female,  $8\frac{1}{2}$ , 18.

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### GENUS III.—STRIX, Linn. SCREECH-OWL.

Bill short, compressed, deep, strong; upper mandible with its dorsal outline straight to the end of the cere, then curved, the sides nearly flat and erect, the tip deflected, with a rounded but sharp-edged point; lower mandible with the dorsal line convex, the sides convex, the edges arched, the tip obliquely truncate. Conch of the ear semicircular, extending from over the anterior angle of the eye to the middle of the lower jaw; aperture large, somewhat square, with an anterior operculum fringed with feathers. Legs rather long, tarsus long, feathered, scaly at the lower part; toes large, the first short, the inner nearly as long as the middle, all with series of small tuberculiform oblong scales, intermixed with a few bristles, and three broad scutella at the end. Claws arched, long, extremely sharp, the edge of the third thin and transversely cracked in old birds. Plumage very soft and downy; facial disks complete. Wings long, ample, rounded; the first quill with the filaments recurved. Tail rather short, even.





*Little or Acadian Owl.*

*Common Mouse.*



Audubon, John James. 1840. "The Little or Acadian Owl, *Nyctale acadica*, Gmel. [Pl. 33]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 1, 123–126. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319146>.

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