

## Chasing Phantoms - Part 2

By Rob Betas

“Don’t you find it a beautiful clean thought, a world empty of people, just uninterrupted grass and a hare sitting up?  
-- D.H. Lawrence

After the big snows in late January, there was a period of about a week where I was able to continue my winter quest -- finding a pair of Great Horned Owls so that I might monitor their nesting progress from late winter into spring. It was slow going, slogging through the woods with well over a foot of snow but I stayed local and wasn’t in any particular hurry.

In early to mid-February, however, the temperatures spiked well above normal and, in no time, the local trails looked more like the Venice canals than they did paths meant for foot-traffic. I switched my emphasis to hiking the rural roads but eventually grew bored with those routes and frustrated by my lack of progress in hearing or seeing an owl.

When most of the standing water had finally soaked into the dark earth, I dug out an old pair of hiking boots that I could dedicate to being my mud boots for the rest of their career. I resumed my evening “owl prowls” and, on one occasion, was finally rewarded with the faint hooting of a distant owl.

There was no mistaking the call, it was definitely that of the Great Horned. Unfortunately, the owl’s soft but persistent hooting was off in the direction of the White Mountain Apache Tribe’s lands. An aside: I always feel uncomfortable putting it in those terms, given that it wasn’t all that long ago when much of the Southwest was Apache land and what wasn’t theirs belonged to other indigenous peoples.

In the fading twilight, I headed in the direction of the calls. Before long, I came to the rickety barbed-wire fence that marks the boundary between the two nations. By the time I made it to the border, it was well past dusk but I still hadn’t switched on my headlamp as the waxing moon was up and showed bright enough for me to make my way.

I stared into the ghostly, moon-lit landscape and felt miserable at being so close but yet so far as clearly, it was out of the question that I should knowingly commit trespass. Nonetheless, it was a victory of sorts to finally make contact so I stood a long while listening to the oddly melancholy call.

As I stood by the fence, I pondered the curious notion of demarcating our lands be they those of nations, neighborhoods or our own backyards. With walls being big in the news, I reflected on a wall’s impact to wildlife movement -- including seasonal migrations, home ranges and the dispersal of new generations.

Just as I was beginning to feel gloomy over the existence of barriers, I heard a slight rustle in the under-story a short distance from where I was standing. I had been still for so long that up-breeze of me, and unaware of my presence, a large raccoon was skittering beneath the lowest wire of the fence, completely undeterred by this particular human boundary.

I clicked on my head-lamp and the faint sound of the switch alerted the raccoon to my presence thus rewarding me with his eerie yellow eye-shine as he glared back in my direction. Unperturbed, the raccoon continued on his way, sauntering off in the direction of my neighborhood, perhaps with a mind towards feasting upon an unguarded bowl of dog chow.

Silver-blue clouds raced high overhead, backlit by the lunar glow. I decided that the time had come to return home but with the thought that I could take heart in the fact that at least one owl was out there, pitching the woo to his unseen mate. Surely, it was only a matter of time before I fulfilled my quest.

As I walked home I continued to brood on the “need” for walls and other boundary markers. Although barbed-wire fencing does separate the State of Arizona from the adjacent lands of the White Mountain Apache Tribe (WMAT), it is virtually nothing more than a flimsy and un-enforced barrier.

In 2007, when my best friend Bob came out from Ohio to visit me in my relatively new home here in Pinetop, I took him hiking to several of my favorite spots in the area. At one point, while we stopped to admire the view from one of the Mogollon Rim trails that overlooks the WMAT lands, Bob remarked on how amazing it was that even in the 21<sup>st</sup>

Century the tribe had been able to protect such vast portions of their lands from the rampant development that is so common on the Anglo lands.

Now granted, Bob had spent much of his life east of the Mississippi but, nonetheless, his point was a good one. We discussed the two cultures (indigenous and Anglo) and their differing land ethics and noted that the reverence by Anglos for our protected public lands (National and State parks, preserves, forests, wilderness areas and refuges) seemed to be consistent with the way the native peoples felt towards their tribal lands.

But while the tribal towns typically started and remained small and sparsely distributed, the Anglo communities only started small and, before long, many developed into towns, cities and ultimately, sprawling metropolitan areas. The obvious conclusion was not only that Anglo populations were ever-increasing but that our appetite for material and consumer goods also appeared to be steadily on the rise.

As such, to keep up with population growth and consumption rates, more and more of our land needed to be put to the plow and saw, paved over for roads and parking lots, mined for minerals and fuel, built upon for homes, businesses, stores and so on and so forth. Perhaps Ed Abbey said it best when he remarked that human population growth follows the same pattern as the cancer cell -- multiply and spread.

We concluded our conversation by noting that the Apache warrior Geronimo might well have agreed with the French artist Paul Gauguin, who, after returning from one of his extended stays in Tahiti, observed that "Civilization is what makes you sick."

In the days to come, I continued to hike locally in the hopes of encountering a pair of owls not residing on private property. Eventually, however, I knew that continuing the local search was futile and that the time had come for me to drive to a different part of the White Mountains. I decided that I would head to the Pinyon-Juniper country between Show Low and Heber and figured that I might as well make a camping trip out of this new phase of my quest.

Shortly before I was set to depart for my camping trip, I learned that one of my aunts was in a Tucson hospital. Because my aunt, uncle and their daughter were my only family in Arizona (all living in the Benson area), I had spent a great deal of time with them during the past 27 years (my tenure residing in this State). As such, there was no question in my mind that I would change my plans and head to Tucson instead.

Because my cousin and her family had full-time jobs, they were making frequent commutes between Benson and Tucson. My uncle, however, was retired and was able to stay with Tucson friends of his, thus allowing him to spend as much time as possible at the hospital.

I didn't know these particular friends of my uncle's so I opted to camp near town up in the Coronado National Forest lands in the Catalina Mountains. After spending my first day with my aunt and uncle in a St. Joseph's ICU room, I was naturally eager to sleep under a blanket of stars. I chose a quiet desert hilltop about 20 miles from the city just off the Reddington Pass Road (a dirt road that is heavily used by local recreators during the weekends but which is reasonably peaceful on the weekdays, including the three days of my visit).

It was nearly dark when I parked my truck and unfolded my cot on which I laid my summer sleeping bag. The forecast for the State called for a warming trend so I hadn't brought my cold weather gear, forgetting that in late February, even during a "warming trend" the desert nights can get down-right frigid.

As I settled in for the night, I gazed into the bowl filled with stars above me. The desert was impressively quiet, given that Tucson, the second largest city in the State, was only an hour's drive from my campsite. I thought of my 81-year old aunt, now probably alone in her hospital room, surrounded by the mechanical hum of various medical monitors and the device that pumped oxygen into her respirator.

The sadness of these thoughts was inescapable and sleep would not come. The crescent moon, now waning, had not yet risen and, other than the pinpricks of light from the stars, the world of my little campsite was cold, dark and seemingly lifeless.

And then I heard it, in the distance, the unmistakable call of the Great Horned Owl. I wasn't about to make my way through the rocky, hilly, and thorn-filled desert in search of the owl but I did experience a feeling of profound

serenity in hearing its plaintive hoots. I listened to the owl for probably a half hour and then, just before I slipped off the edge of consciousness and into a deep slumber, I heard it, another owl, even more distant, calling back.

Post Script: My aunt died three days after I had returned from my trip to see her at St. Joseph's. One of the First Nation peoples (the Kwakwaka'wakw of British Columbia) believe that shortly before you die you will hear an owl call your name. It made me wonder.