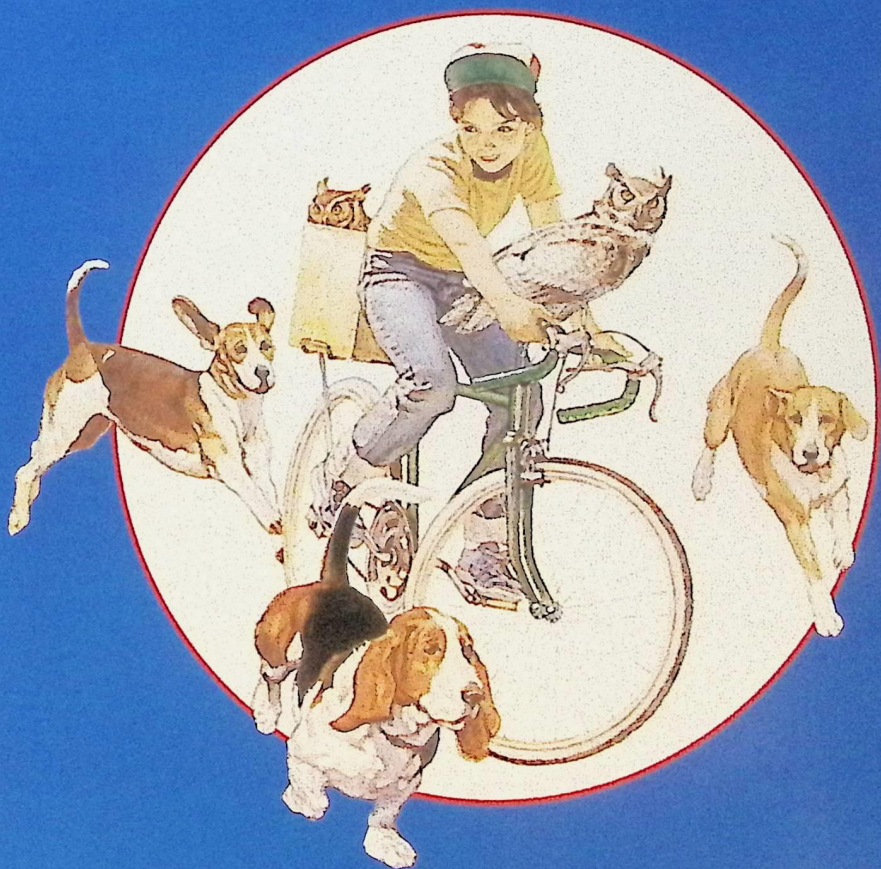


# Owls in the Family



Farley Mowat

## Chapter 1

One May morning, my friend Bruce and I went for a hike on the prairie.

Spring was late that year in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Snowdrifts still clung along the steep banks of the river, in the shelter of the cottonwood trees. The river was icy with thaw water and, as we crossed over the Railroad Bridge, we could feel a cold breath rising from it. But we felt another breath, a gentle one, blowing across the distant wheat fields and smelling like warm sun shining on soft mud. It was the spring wind, and the smell of it made us walk faster. We were in a hurry to get out of the city and into the real prairie, where you can climb a fence post and see for about a million miles—that's how flat the prairie is.

The great thing about Saskatoon was the way it ended sharp all around its edge. There were no outskirts to Saskatoon. When you stepped off the end of the Railroad Bridge you stepped right onto the prairie and there you were—free as the gophers.

Gophers were the commonest thing on the prairie. The little mounds of yellow dirt around their burrows were so thick, sometimes, it looked as if the fields had yellow measles.

But this day Bruce and I weren't interested in gophers. We were looking for an owl's nest. We had decided that we wanted some pet owls, and if you



want pet owls you have to find a nest and get the young ones out of it.

We headed for the nearest of the clumps of cottonwood trees that dot the prairies, and which are called "bluffs" out in Saskatchewan. The ground was spongy under our sneakers, and it squooshed when we hit a wet place. A big jack rabbit bounced up right under my feet, and scared me so much I jumped almost as high as he did. And as we came nearer the bluff, two crows came zooming out of it and swooped down on us, cawing their heads off.

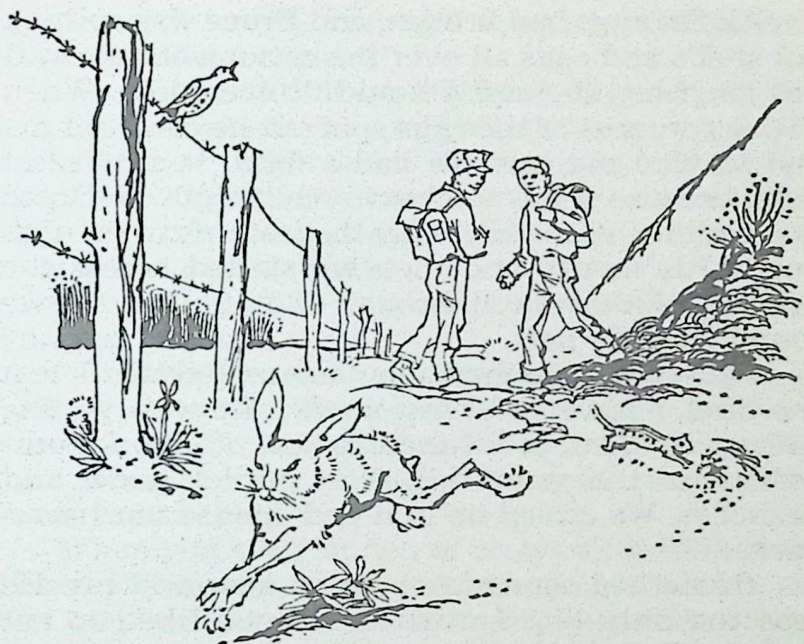
Bluffs are funny places in the spring. The cottonwood trees shed a kind of white fluffy stuff that looks like snow. Sometimes it's so thick it comes right over the top of your sneakers and you get a queer feeling that you really *are* walking through snow, even though the sun on your back is making you sweat right through your shirt.

We walked through this bluff, scuffing our feet in the cottonwood snow and stirring it up in clouds. We kept looking up; and after a while, sure enough, we saw a big mess of twigs high up in a poplar.

"All right," Bruce said to the two crows which were swooping and hollering at us. "If you want me to snatch your eggs—I will!"

With that he handed me his haversack and began to shinny up the tree.

It was an easy climb, because cottonwood poplars always have lots of branches. When he got to the nest and looked into it I yelled up at him: "Any eggs?" Bruce grinned but he wouldn't answer. I could see him doing something with his free hand—the one he wasn't holding on with—and I knew there



were eggs there all right. I watched, and sure enough he was popping them into his mouth so he could carry them down out of the tree.

We always carried eggs down out of trees that way. The only thing was, crows' eggs are pretty big, and if you have to stuff three or four of them into your mouth it nearly chokes you.

Bruce started to climb down. When he got about ten feet from the ground he stepped on a rotten branch. Poplar branches are always rotten near the ground, and you have to watch out for them. I guess Bruce forgot. Anyway, the branch broke and he slid the rest of the way and lit on his seat with a good hard bump.



All the eggs had broken, and Bruce was spitting out shells and eggs all over the cottonwood snow. I got laughing so hard I couldn't even talk. When Bruce got most of the eggs spat out he came for me and tackled me, and we had a fight. It didn't last long, because it was too hot to really fight, so Bruce ate a sardine sandwich to get the taste of crows' eggs out of his mouth and then we started across the prairie again to search through other bluffs until we found an owl's nest.

I guess we searched about a hundred bluffs that morning, but we never saw an owl. We were getting hungry by then, so we made a sort of nest for ourselves on the ground, out of poplar snow and branches. We curled up in it and opened our haversacks.

Bruce had sandwiches and a lemon in his. He was the only boy I ever knew who liked to eat lemons. He said they were better than oranges, any day of the week.

I had a hard-boiled egg and just for fun I reached over and cracked the shell on Bruce's head. He yelled, and we had another fight, and rolled all over his sardine sandwiches.

We were just finishing our lunch when a wood gopher came snuffling along through the cottonwood snow. Wood gophers are gray and have big bushy tails. This one came right up to us and, when I held a crust out to him, he shuffled up and took it out of my hand.

"Got no sense," said Bruce. "You might have been a coyote, and then where'd he be at?"

"Heck," I said. "He's got more sense than you. Do I look like a coyote?"

The gopher didn't say anything. He just took the crust and scuttled away to his hole somewhere. We picked up our haversacks. The sun was as bright as fireworks and the sky was so clear you could look right through it—like looking through a blue window. We started to walk.

All of a sudden Bruce stopped so fast that I bumped into him.

"Lookee!" he said, and pointed to a bluff about half a mile away. There must have been a million crows around it. It looked as if the bluff was on fire and filling the sky with black smoke—that's how many crows there were.

When you see a bunch of crows all yelling their heads off at something, you can almost bet it's an owl they're after. Crows and owls hate each other, and when a crow spots an owl, he'll call every other crow for miles and they all join in and mob the owl.

We headed for that bluff at a run. The crows saw us coming but they were too excited to pay much attention. We were nearly deaf with their racket by the time we reached the edge of the trees. I was ahead of Bruce when I saw something big and slow go drifting out of one poplar into another. It was a great horned owl, the biggest kind of owl there is, and as soon as it flew, the whole lot of crows came swooping down on it, cawing like fury. I noticed they were careful not to get too close.

Bruce and I started to hunt for the nest. After a while, the owl got more worried about us than about





the crows and away he went. He flew low over the fields, almost touching the ground. That way the crows couldn't dive on him. If they tried it they would shoot past him and crash into the dirt.



There wasn't any owl's nest in that bluff after all, but we didn't worry. We knew the nest would have to be in some bluff not too far away. All we had to do was look.

We looked in different bluffs all afternoon. We found seven crows' nests, a red-tailed hawk's nest, and three magpies' nests. I tore the seat out of my trousers climbing to the hawk's-nest, and we both got Russian thistles in our sneakers, so we had sore feet. It got hotter and hotter, and we were so thirsty I could have eaten a lemon myself, except that Bruce didn't have any more.

It was past suppertime when we started back toward the railroad. By then we were pretending we were a couple of Arabs lost in the desert. Our camels had died of thirst, and we were going to die too unless we found some water pretty soon.

"Listen," Bruce said. "There's an old well at



Haultain Corner. If we cut over past Barney's Slough to the section road, we can get a drink."

"Too late," I told him. "Good-by old pal, old Sheik. I am doomed. Go on and leave me lay."

"Oh, nuts," said Bruce. "I'm thirsty. C'mon, let's go."

So we cut past Barney's Slough and there were about a thousand mallard ducks on it. They all jumped into the air as we went by and their wings made a sound like a freight train going over a bridge.

"Wish I had my dad's gun!" said Bruce.

But I was wondering why on the prairies they call lakes and ponds "sloughs." I still don't know why. But that's what they're called in Saskatoon.

There was one big bluff between us and Haultain Corner. It was too far to go around it, so we walked right through it. Anyway, it was cooler in among the trees. When we were about halfway through I spotted a crow's-nest in a big old cottonwood.

"Bet it's empty," I said to Bruce. But the truth was that I was just too hot and tired to climb any more trees. Bruce felt the same way, and we walked past. But I took one last look up at it, and there, sticking over the edge of the nest, was the biggest bunch of tail feathers you ever saw. My heart jumped right into my throat and I grabbed Bruce by the shirt and pointed up.

It was a great horned owl all right. We kept as quiet as we could, so as not to scare her, and then we looked around the bottom of the tree. There were bits of rabbits and gophers, and lots of owl pellets.

When owls catch something, they eat the whole thing—bones and fur and all. Then, after a while, they burp and spit out a ball of hair and bones. That's an owl pellet.

"By Gang! We found it!" Bruce whispered.

"I found it," I said.

"Okay," said Bruce. "*You* found it, then. So how about you climbing up and seeing how many young ones are in it?"

"Nothing doing, old pal," I replied. "I found the nest. So if *you* want one of the owlets, *you* climb up and have a look."

Neither of us was keen to climb that tree. The old owl was sticking close to her nest, and you can't always tell how fierce an owl is going to be. They can be pretty fierce sometimes.

"Say," said Bruce after a while, "why don't we just leave her be for now? Might scare her into leaving the nest for good if *we* climbed up. What say we get Mr. Miller, and come back tomorrow?"

Mr. Miller was one of our teachers. Bruce and I liked him because he liked the prairie too. He was a great one for taking pictures of birds and things. We knew he would be crazy to get some pictures of the owl—and Mr. Miller never minded climbing trees.

"Sure," I said. "Good idea."

We went off to Haultain Corner and got a drink of water that tasted like old nails, out of the broken pump. Then we walked on home. That night I told Dad about the owl's-nest, and he looked at Mother, and all he said was:

"Oh NO! Not owls too."



## Chapter 2

The reason Dad said: "Oh NO! Not owls too" was because I already had some pets.

There was a summerhouse in our back yard and we kept about thirty gophers in it. They belonged to Bruce and me, and to another boy called Murray. We caught them out on the prairie, using snares made of heavy twine.

The way you do it is like this: You walk along until you spot a gopher sitting up beside his hole. Gophers sit straight up, reaching their noses as high as they can, so they can see farther. When you begin to get too close they flick their tails, give a little jump, and whisk down their holes. As soon as they do that, you take a piece of twine that has a noose tied in one end, and you spread the noose over the hole. Then you lie down in the grass holding the other end of the twine in your hand. You can hear the gopher all the while, whistling away to himself somewhere underground. He can hear you, too, and he's wondering what you're up to.

After a while he gets so curious he can't stand it. Out pops his head, and you give a yank on the twine. You have to haul in fast, because if the twine gets loose he'll slip his head out of the noose and zip back down his hole.

We had rats too. Murray's dad was a professor at the university and he got us some white rats from the medical school. We kept them in our garage,

which made my Dad a little peeved, because he couldn't put the car in the garage for fear the rats would make nests inside the seats. Nobody ever knew how many rats we had because they have so many babies, and they have them so fast. We gave white rats away to all the kids in Saskatoon, but we always seemed to end up with as many as we had at first.

There were the rats and gophers, and then there was a big cardboard box full of garter snakes that we kept under the back porch, because my mother wouldn't let me keep them in the house. Then there were the pigeons. I usually had about ten of them, but they kept bringing their friends and relations for visits, so I never knew how many to expect when I went out to feed them in the mornings. There were some rabbits too, and then there was Mutt, my dog—but he wasn't a pet; he was one of the family.

Sunday morning my father said:

"Billy, I think you have enough pets. I don't think you'd better bring home any owls. In any case, the owls might eat your rats and rabbits and gophers. . . ."

He stopped talking and a queer look came into his face. Then he said:

"On second thought—maybe we *need* an owl around this place!"

So it was all right.

Sunday afternoon Bruce and I met Mr. Miller at his house. He was a big man with a bald head. He wore short pants and carried a great big haversack full of cameras and films. He was excited about the



owl's-nest, all right, and he was in such a hurry to get to it that Bruce and I had to run most of the way, just to keep up with him.

When we reached the edge of the Owl Bluff Mr. Miller got out his biggest camera and, after he had fussed with it for about half an hour, he said he was ready.

"We'll walk Indian file, boys," he said, "and quiet as mice. Tiptoe . . . Mustn't scare the owl away."

Well, that sounded all right, only you can't walk quietly in a poplar bluff because of all the dead sticks underfoot. They crack and pop like firecrackers. Under Mr. Miller's feet they sounded like cannon shots. Anyway, when we got to the nest tree there was no sign of the owl.

"Are you sure this IS an owl's-nest?" Mr. Miller asked us.

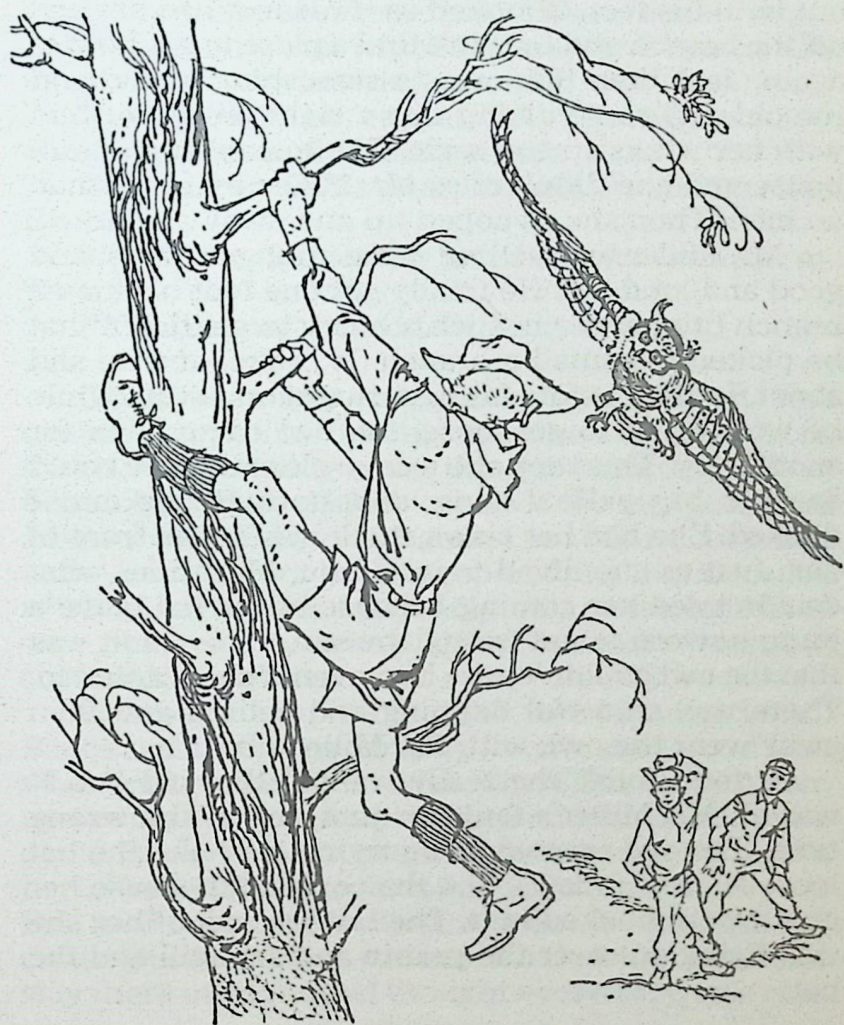
"Yes, sir!" Bruce answered. "We seen the owl setting on it!"

Mr. Miller shuddered. "*Saw* the owl *sitting* on it, Bruce. . . . Hmmm. . . . Well—I suppose I'd better climb up and take a peek. But if you ask me, I think it's just an old crow's-nest."

He put down his big haversack and the camera, and up he went. He was wearing a big floppy hat to keep his head from getting sunburned and I don't think he could see out from under it very well.

"Boy, has he got knobby knees!" Bruce whispered to me. We both started to giggle and we were still giggling when Mr. Miller began to shout.

"Hoyee!" he yelled. "SCAT—WHOOEEE! Hoy, HOY!"





Bruce and I ran around the other side of the tree so we could see up to the nest. Mr. Miller was hanging onto the tree with both arms and he was kicking out with his feet. It looked as if his feet had slipped off the branch and couldn't find a place to get hold of again. Just then there was a swooshing sound and the old owl came diving down right on top of him with her wings spread wide. She looked as big as a house and she didn't miss Mr. Miller by more than an inch. Then she swooped up and away again.

Mr. Miller was yelling some strange things, and good and loud too. He finally got one foot back on a branch but he was in such a hurry to get down that he picked too small a branch. It broke, and he slid about five feet before his belt caught on a stub. While he was trying to get loose, the owl came back for another try. This time she was so close that we could see her big yellow eyes, and both Bruce and I ducked. She had her claws stuck way out in front of her. Just as she dived toward him, Mr. Miller, who couldn't see her coming because of his hat, gave a jump upward to get free of the stub. The result was that the owl couldn't miss him even if she wanted to. There was an awful flapping and yelling and then away went the owl, with Mr. Miller's hat.

I don't think she really wanted that old hat. It was all Mr. Miller's fault for jumping at the wrong time. The owl seemed to be trying to shake the hat loose from her claws, but she couldn't, because her claws were hooked in it. The last we saw of her she was flying out over the prairie and she still had the hat.

Farley Mowat's funniest book tells the adventures of Wol and Weeps, two owls from Saskatchewan who shake up a whole neighborhood, turn a house topsy-turvy, and outsmart Mutt, the dog hero of *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*. Wol brings dead skunks to the family dinner table and terrorizes the minister, the postman, and the French teacher. Weeps is a comical bird, afraid of everything except Mutt, and he never does learn how to fly. Here is the heartwarming story of how a boy named Billy finds Wol and Weeps and unwittingly adds two new members to his family.

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