

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

Who Gives a Hoot?

They were sitting around in the American Legion Bar up in Three Lakes the other night—"just keeping the dust off the cribbage board" is the way Steady Eddy puts it—and they got to discussing the story in the newspapers that said baby peregrine falcons were being killed by great horned owls along the Mississippi River north of La Crosse. Because the peregrine falcon is an endangered species, the DNR was going to start killing some great horned owls to help the falcons out a little bit.

"Well, you know," Gene the bartender was saying, "those owls are real night hunters and the falcons only fly in the daylight hours. The DNR says the owls have been going around and killing those baby falcons. Now, normally, not flying at night is a pretty good idea if you don't have the equipment for it. I remember when the Chinese had the best aviation safety record in the world; all the other airlines said sure, big deal, it was because the Chinese airline didn't fly at night, or in bad weather of any kind, for that matter. Can you imagine? You couldn't catch a red-eye flight anywhere in Red China. Boy, if that was this country, we would still be a wilderness area, with people trying not to step in the moose droppings on Main Street."

Gene waited for a reaction from his customers, all two them: the good priest and the good doctor.

"Well," Doc said, "as a matter of fact, you still have to watch yourself, because this bar fills up with the same stuff at times. Now, where did you read about these owls?"

Gene slid from his stool as smoothly as an otter dunking for trout. He surfaced with a folded newspaper and a fish-eating grin. The headline read: "DNR to kill owls to save falcons from predation."

"Courtesy of the Associated Press," Gene said. "They talked to Charlene Gieck, who's with the DNR's Bureau of Endangered Resources. She says that there are two pairs of falcons nesting near Alma, Wis., and they were among the falcons released at Weaver Dunes in Minnesota across from Alma. The falcons flew across the river—"

"Surprise, surprise," Doc said.

"—and are in Wisconsin now, and Wisconsin wants to protect them. Gieck says that the two nesting pairs of falcons produced one young falcon in 1986 and at least four in 1987, but all of the young were killed by great horned owls. She says that the owls hunt at night, when the adult peregrines are away from the nest."

"Where the hell do the adults go?" Doc asked.

"Out for pizza," Gene said. "I don't know. It doesn't say where they go. They're 'away.'"

"'Away,'" Doc said, turning to Father Himmelsbach. "The adult falcons are 'away' and the owls come and eat the little falcons. Now, if these were your parishioners, you'd be raising hell with the falcons for not being home."

"I would say," Father Himmelsbach said, "that fortunately, this is not a problem for us because we do not have too many falcons roosting in our parish at the present time. As a general rule, our congregation tends to be more owly than anything else anyway."

Gene shook his head and blinked the way he does when tourists from Chicago order drinks with little parasols in the glasses.

"Gieck says," Gene said, "that Minnesota had similar problems with great horned owls killing young falcons that had been released at Weaver Dunes, and their DNR began killing some owls. The first year they 'took out' 15 owls and the next year they 'took out' five. After that, Gieck says, they didn't lose any more peregrine falcons."

"When she says 'took out,'" Doc said, "I assume she means 'took out' in the military sense, that the owls were not

'taken out' in cars, planes and trains. They were killed. Dead. Finis. That kind of 'took out.'"

"They were harvested?" asked Father Himmelsbach.

"No," Doc said. "Game birds are



harvested. Game animals are harvested. Game fish are harvested. Owls get 'taken out.' So, how many owls are going to get 'taken out?'"

"Well," Gene said. "Let me read you what the DNR says. Charlene Gieck says, and these are her exact words:

'I'm hoping it's going to be less than 20, but who knows? The DNR plans to try some live-trapping of the owls, which would then be killed to keep them from flying back....'

"She also says that the DNR will try 'calling them in' by playing tapes, recordings of crows mobbing, a rabbit squealing or the great horned owl's own territorial call. The owls that are 'called in' usually land on a particular tree, called a 'snag tree,' which is usually bare. Gieck says that 'the owl hunter will be stationed near the tree with a shotgun.'"

"I am aware," Doc said, "that the peregrine falcon is an endangered species, and it is only fitting and meet that we do all we can to bring it back in

view of the fact that our use of DDT endangered the eggs and the species in the first place. But why not stock them where they have a better chance of making it? You know, they stocked some peregrines in cities to live on the



skyscrapers and feed on the pigeons. Only they're passing up the pigeons and feeding on other birds."

"If they're feeding on songbirds," Father Himmelsbach said, "I say, bring in the owls."

Gene left to bring in the brandy. ■