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Great Grey Owls and wing formulae

Out of Vassar, Manitoba, in woodland stripped bare by winter, an owl the colour of fireplace soot rested on a broken-off limb. It looked bigger than a Powerful Owl. The temperature was -21°C with sharp flakes of snow blowing against my face. Through the glasses I could see a Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa*.

The generic name, *Strix*, comes from both Latin (*strix*) and Greek (*strix*), and denotes a kind of owl, especially a strident one (screech-owl). The species name *nebulosa* comes from the Latin for 'clouded' in reference to the owl's plumage.

In dimensions, this owl is larger than the Great Horned Owl or Powerful Owl. It is sooty grey with irregular dusky stripes and lighter greyish-white eyebrows and lores (space between the eye and the bill), and light chin marks. Its beak is dull yellow, its eyes bright lemon-yellow. It has a prominent facial disc for funnelling sound into its asymmetrical ears, one set higher than the other on the side of its head so the owl can triangulate distances and positions of minute sounds in the snow of moving prey. Boobooks and other *Ninox* such as Powerful Owls do not have asymmetrical ears. They hunt more by sight than by hearing.

The Great Grey is the largest 'wood owl', the owls in the genus *Strix*. Others include the Spotted and Barred Owl in North America, and the Tawny Owl in Europe. By dimensions, it is the largest owl in North America, about 65 cm long from beak to tail, compared to 58 cm for the Snowy Owl and Great Horned Owl, and about 55 cm for the Powerful Owl.

A.C. Bent in 1938 said of this enormous owl, 'its long wings and tail, its large round head, and its long, fluffy plumage make it seem much larger than it really is.