



OWL NEST AND BLIND IN HERONRY

Photo shows blind used for photographing nest, which can be seen at left center—a single large nest in dead tree.



THE OWL OFFSPRING ON THE GROUND

The belligerent attitude was proved to be all bluff, and the youngster was duly banded.

Photos by the Author.

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A Study of Great Horned Owls in the Delaware City Heronry

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EVER since I got a Graflex camera it has been my ambition to photograph wild birds at home. More than any I desired to photograph a Great Horned Owl, and when the opportunity presented itself last winter, I made the most of it. Near Delaware City, Del., there is a grove of trees along a marshy stream which for many years has been used for nesting sites by Great Blue Herons. On February 10, 1929, I visited this rookery and found in one of the old Heron nests the home of a Great Horned Owl.

At about 6:30 A.M. we arrived at the heron rookery. Grackles and Redwings were flying over in small flocks, while four Carolina Wrens were continually singing. The trees had been cut down for lumber till only one third were left. One, a dead Chestnut, had a single bulky nest near the top. It was considerably larger than the rest and was quite conspicuous even from the road.

As I was examining this nest from close at hand, I noticed what seemed to be a dead stick standing upright in the middle, but when the wind blew, it moved. I immediately moved off a short distance and could see a similar stick near the first.

Owl ears! I called John Emlen over, and while he watched the nest I went to the tree and pounded on it with a stick. Sure enough, off flew a Great Horned Owl. She flew out of sight over the trees, but there could be no doubt of what we had found. We had no climbing irons with us and were unable to see what was inside the nest. The owl soon returned and perched in a nearby tree where we had an excellent opportunity to observe her.

As we started back across the field, she moved to another tree and was set upon by crows. We sat down to see the fun. Much to our surprise she paid not the slightest attention to them, but flew straight to her nest where she turned over her eggs, then fluffed up her feathers and settled on them. We went away and left her on her nest.

A week later we returned prepared to climb the tree. We arrived at the rookery at about 3:00 P.M. While still quite a distance away, we could see the owl on the nest. She was moving about evidently preparing to leave, for we were still over 300 yards away when she left and was immediately pursued by crows.

I was the first to attempt the climb, but the dead wood afforded no foothold, and I was forced to give it up. John Emlen then essayed a nearby tulip poplar tree, and in a short while he was in the topmost branches looking into the nest. It was rather difficult to see into the deep pocket in the nest, but with the aid of field glasses he was able to make out the tops of two white eggs. The camera was sent up for photographs, and after taking a few shots of the nest he climbed down.

We were rather puzzled by the owl's behavior, for as I said she left her nest while we were quite a distance away. It may have been that the day was warmer, and the eggs needed less attention than before, or that she saw we meant business and decided to leave us a clear field.

The next visit was paid on Saturday, February 23rd, a cold, raw day with snow on the ground. At our approach the owl went through her usual egg turning process, then flew off. We sat down on the ground near the nest, and after a few

minutes waiting saw the owl return and settle on her eggs. With a motion-picture camera we were able to get some pictures of her as she came on. Each time we moved she would fly off but soon returned, We were able to get quite close and photograph her on the nest.

On March 3rd we paid another visit to the owl. We thought that it would be time for the eggs to have hatched, and were not at all surprised when the owl remained on her nest till we were quite close. We both got out our cameras and climbed to a good lookout in a tree. The owl returned in a short while and we photographed her as she lit. A slight movement on my part scared her off, but not for long, for in a few moments she came back. Again she flew off, this time showing no desire to return. Emlen then put on the irons and was able to climb up the tree in a few minutes. Strange to say the owl came nearer and while he was looking into the nest, she flew on and settled over her young. She remained long enough to warm her babies, then flew off not to return till we had gone entirely away. We then started to build a platform for an observation blind. I hoisted up the lumber and after a half hour's work, the frame was complete, when Emlen climbed down. We then went away and saw with satisfaction that the bird returned as soon as we were gone.

The owlets at this time were very small and covered with a soft white down. They showed no animation at all but were content to lie cuddled together in the nest. Many trees had been cut down since our last visit, and we could only hope that the owl tree would be spared till the birds could care for themselves.

College examinations prevented any further visits till March 24th. The spring recess began at this time and I planned to spend the entire week with the owls. It was not until the 26th that I was able to do anything with them. My notes are as follows:—

“This morning the prospects looked good for a clear day, so I made plans to visit the rookery. After breakfast was over, I gathered together the necessary materials and set out. The owl allowed me to approach to within 100 yards before flying

he solemnly stalks around the edge of the nest, carefully lifting his feet and digging in his talons at each step. Next, he scratches himself, first with his right foot, then with his left. He then indulges in a yawn or two after which he backs up to the edge and raises his wings over his head for a good stretching. Finally he plunges his beak into the nest and shakes the sticks for all he's worth. All these exercises are performed with the greatest possible deliberation and solemnity, and make a most amusing spectacle.

"In about fifteen minutes the old bird returns to her perch, looks around, then flies directly to the nest. I almost stop breathing while she looks intently at my shelter. She is still a bit restless and does not like the click of the camera. She flies back to her perch for another survey. The little owl finishes his toilet by carefully cleaning his fingernails with his bill. He seems to be wide awake and ready for lunch. The owl silently came on the nest while I was writing, so I dropped everything and took two pictures of her. She certainly snaps her head around when the shutter clicks, but shows no signs of leaving. The little fellow pecks at his mother's foot as if to say, 'Come on, Ma, How about some lunch?' The old bird has settled on the nest with the youngster cuddled up against her. Both seem ready to take a nap. Two herons have just lit over my head, the owls are contentedly napping, and everything is quiet. I have taken one more picture of the owls to finish the film and am now ready to leave."

When I raised the rope to fasten the camera, the owl merely opened one eye, but when I started to lower it, she flew off to her perch. She allowed me to get more than half-way down the tree before she flew away. I gathered up my equipment, making sure to put the films in a safe place, and drove back to camp.

The weather was unpleasant for the remainder of the week, so it was not until the following week-end that I saw the owls again. This time John Emlen and I came prepared to band the young owl. My part in this work was to go up and get the bird, so I put on the irons and climbed up. As I neared the nest I could hear a rather unpleasant hissing noise coming

from the nest. When my head came level with the top, the young owl backed up to the edge of the nest, ruffled up his feathers, and snapped his beak at me in a most threatening manner. A slight movement on my part caused him to back off the nest and tumble to a neighboring tree in a most awkward fashion. After a bit of shaking, he was dislodged from his precarious perch, and sent gliding to earth very gracefully. He was easily captured, though he threatened all sorts of harm which proved to be all bluff. He was banded, wrapped in a shirt and sent up to me for replacement in his nest. But after he had had a taste of life on the ground, he was not at all content to stay in the nest, but immediately jumped off, as soon as I released him, and flew to the ground again, this time exhibiting much greater skill in aerial navigation than before. He was found sitting quietly in several inches of water.

After several unsuccessful attempts to lodge him in a tree, he was left sitting on a small branch. Here's hoping he stays out of mischief and lives to a ripe old age.