

STUDIES OF THE LONG-EARED OWL

BY R. L. HAINES

One afternoon, late in January of 1939, I was walking through a patch of woodland in Burlington County, N. J. that has long been one of my favorite haunts. The wood is a mixture of oak, hickory, gray birch and aspen, with several stands of scrub pine and red cedar, and has been untouched by the hand of man long enough to have developed an enchanting wildness and seclusion. Wandering through this dense growth I was halted by the dark form of an owl outlined momentarily against the pink afterglow of the setting sun. Soon another had silently followed the first into the shadows of the woods. Almost over my head a third Long Eared Owl was perched in a pine close to the trunk. Its body was compressed and its ear tufts held erect. For several minutes it remained in the tree, turning its head from side to side and shifting from one foot to the other, then flew off as noiselessly as its companions.

During the rest of the winter I observed the owls numerous times, and finding them still about in the first week of April I made a thorough search of all the old crows' nests in the vicinity to see if they might have liked the environment well enough to stay and raise a family. I had taken my son, Everett, along to help with the climbing, and his efforts were well rewarded for, in spite of a bad case of poison ivy which developed the next day, we finally found the female owl sitting on a nest, which, as I had anticipated, had been borrowed from the crows, and was well concealed in the middle of a red cedar at a height of about eighteen feet. The nesting tree, together with a few young cedars and birches, was situated in an open glade within a surrounding grove of ancient cedars. The floor of this glade was matted with honeysuckle which was already beginning to reach up over the dead and drooping lower branches of the older trees. In two of these the male bird had roosts, so effectively chosen that it was only with the utmost caution that he could be seen before he flew.

At dusk on May the second I walked quietly through the woods, silent now except for a few low chuckles from a wood thrush and the evening song of an oven-bird, until I came to the edge of the glade. On all my previous visits the nest was occupied by the female, who invariably sat motionless with ear tufts erect, the male bird disappearing silently from his roost at my approach. On this occasion, however, the brooding bird was absent and I was greeted by a kissing sound similar to the familiar squeak used by bird observers. At once I realized that the young owls were already hatched and that I was being coaxed away from the nest, so I hastily hid myself and remained quiet for the next two hours. The two old birds sailed about for a few minutes; then the female flew off to hunt in the adjacent meadow, and the male perched in a tree nearby, where he stayed until I left. His call, given occasionally in three, but generally in four syllables, suggestive of the sound "Hwa-Hwát-hwa-hwa," was uttered repeatedly in a

resonant tone expressive of his concern. It had a nasal quality that reminded me somewhat of the Florida Gallinule. During this time the female visited the nest twice. Her approach could be anticipated by the slightly more excited call of the male, but the young made no sound that could be heard. A quawking Night Heron passed overhead and faded into the distance, and the sleepy song of a field sparrow occasionally came up from the meadow. The spell cast over me by the darkening woodland was broken, as I finally moved to go, by the frenzied squeaky scolding of the parent owls.

The following Sunday, May the seventh, on nearing the nest I was greeted by the appearance of two surprisingly large heads protruding from under the wings of the female, who, with much vituperation, soon left the nest, exposing five downy, white birds.

By this time I had made so many visits to the woods that I decided it would be wise to talk to the owner and obtain his permission to come and go as I pleased. This I hesitated to do as farmers are sometimes prejudiced against hawks and owls. Later, however, I was glad I had made his friendship for, though indifferent to the owls, he was distinctly unfriendly toward trespassers, as someone had been stealing his wood.

On the evening of May the tenth I took a long ladder into the woods to aid in obtaining photographs. The female was on the nest, the young having grown so large that their gray and white down showed between her and its edge. She sat quietly until the ladder was moved to a nearby tree, when she left the nest and joined her mate on the ground. They both thrashed about hysterically, coaxing me off with the same cries I had heard previously accompanied by an occasional catbird-like mew.

The male bird, seen in good light, could be distinguished from the female by his grayer color. This particular evening, after their first tantrum, both birds alighted in nearby trees and proceeded to scold because of the intrusion. The voice of the female, although similar to that of the male, was sufficiently characteristic to make her identification easy from then on. Her call, like the male's, was in three or four syllables. It was higher pitched, and, lacking the accentuation and resonant quality of her mate's voice, became monotonous after much repetition. It might be expressed as "weck, weck, weck, weck."

While perched almost above me, the male lowered his head and turned it from side to side, apparently wiping his bill on the branch on which he was standing. After a few such twists of the head he disgorged a pellet which rattled through the branches and dropped to the ground.

From the time the young owls were hatched the parent birds assumed a crouching position, with eartufts flattened against the head as if in readiness to defend the young. On May the eleventh a Crow and Bluejay attacked the female. At once she ceased scolding me, raised her eartufts and perched erect and motionless until the attack was over. As the young grew and became more independent, the parents perched more and more in the normal attitude.

The transformation of a medium sized owl into an ominously large bird of prey the moment the Long Eared Owl spreads its wings and flies off has always impressed me. I confess much admiration for its ability to change from a meek and self-effacing individual to the glaring master of its domain. The secret, of course, lies in the long and powerful wings, which are even longer, I believe, than generally depicted. In this pair of birds I found that they always extended an inch or more past the tail. When folded tight against the body the tips of the primaries crossed and gave the rounded tail the effect of being depressed at the center with pointed sides. Although Audubon shows the wings extending somewhat beyond the tip of the tail, most of the paintings of the bird illustrate the tail as extending beyond the wing tips.

By the fourteenth of May, or approximately two weeks after hatching, the fledglings had grown so large that they filled the nest to its edge. Their coloration was becoming deeper gray and the facial disk a pronounced black.

On the eighteenth, early in the morning, J. K. Potter and J. Fletcher Street went with me to make photographs of the young birds before they should leave the nest. We found only one in the nest, two a few feet away, one in the top of the tree, and one in a cedar about fifteen feet distant. While I was removing them from the tree to a position in which they could be photographed together, the female swooped down and hit my head with sufficient force to draw blood. She must have struck with her talons in passing for to Mr. Potter she appeared several inches from my head. She swooped down twice more, but I had taken the precaution of putting on a hat. While flying about she was silent except for much snapping of her beak. The young, though they looked soft and dainty in their downy feathers, showed plenty of defiance. When picked up they snapped their bills, ruffled their feathers, and made a low menacing hiss, which was followed by defecating.

Three days later I returned with Mr. Street, who wished to obtain some color photographs, together with Mrs. Street and P. C. Walton. It required several minutes to locate the young birds which were huddled in the cedars; one fully fifty feet from the nest. The parents appeared to depend upon the protective coloration of the young after they had left the nest, for we were not scolded until after we had found them. The primaries and tail feathers were by this time well developed, dark gray with narrow light bars on the outer half; buff on the basal half. The dark gray face, from which peered bright yellow eyes, was edged with buff. Around the upper mandible of the gray beak were whisker-like feathers. The rest of the body was covered with light gray down barred with white, showing a tinge of buff. The birds, as well as ourselves, were well soaked from a heavy shower. By the matting of the wet feathers the aural cavities were exposed. It would not have occurred to me to look for such an astoundingly large opening in the head of such a small bird; each ear extended over approximately one-fifth of the circumference of the head.

I was unable at any time to make observations of the actual feeding of the young. When they left the nest it was filled almost level with the remains of

mice and excreta, yet the birds were immaculately clean. Several partially eaten meadow mice, which appeared to have been half swallowed and later coughed up, were found hanging in the trees. The heads and part of the chest were gone, not torn off but apparently digested away. Poorly formed pellets, thin and drawn out like strings, were also found beneath the trees. The only evidence of variation from the mouse diet was a few feathers that might have been those of an unfortunate Yellow Throat.

A few evenings later I took my wife with me to show her the beauty of the drama which had been absorbing so much of my spare time that my family was beginning to call me "owly." We walked through the moonlit meadow, silent but for a few "good nights" from the Henslow's Sparrows, to the edge of the wood. A rusty squeak, thrice repeated, came from the center of the glade. As we continued to approach the female uttered a "weck-weck" and the squeaking ceased. She then commenced a series of calls varying greatly from any I had heard before. My wife said "She is saying "Whoos the' ere, what! Whoos the' ere." In a few moments the male floated silently over our heads and a chorus of high pitched squeaks ("Tsi-Tsi-Tsi; Tsi-Tsi-Tsi") emitted with a katydid-like cadence filled the glade. As the chorus continued the male alighted calling "What, What' Whut" which the female answered with a mewing "wee-awooooo." After a few minutes of quiet the female gave a few throaty chuckles which again excited the chorus of the baby birds. Some motion from us attracting her, she took up a perch over our heads and tried to silence her persistent children with a musical "Quiet dea' er, naughteeeee." The remarkable change in the character of the female's voice might well be due to the fact that she was now talking to her young at their active time of day, rather than scolding an intruder. Her tonal variations were certainly as expressive as mine or those of my wife in disciplining our year old baby, and the small owls obeyed her commands much better.

On the morning of May the thirtieth my attention was drawn toward a large Pin Oak by a low chucking note resembling the scolding of a catbird. There among the lower branches the five immature owls were perched, erect and closely resembling the adults. Much more brown showed in their plumage and the flight feathers were well developed, but the head and eartufts were still downy gray. With some hesitation they flew short distances, appearing very similar to the adults. The buff color at the base of the primaries made spots as prominent when seen in flight from below, as the light spots which showed in the wings of the parent birds.

For the following three weeks the young were always found near the nesting area. Their calls became gradually louder and deeper. At a distance they might easily be confused with the "Killdeee" of the Killdeer. The parents showed less and less excitement at my intrusion. On the first of June the female stood motionless and silent on a favorite perch, her body contracted and her eartufts erect, while the young called insistently. Thereafter they wandered

about over several acres of woodland and the adults were seen only while hunting over the meadow.

When I entered the woods on the evening of July the second the owls could be heard calling from some large oaks and hickories bordering the meadow. As I paused at the edge of the wood to listen a Night Heron flew over, followed closely by an owl. The similarity of the two birds was striking, except for the unevenness of the latter's flight.

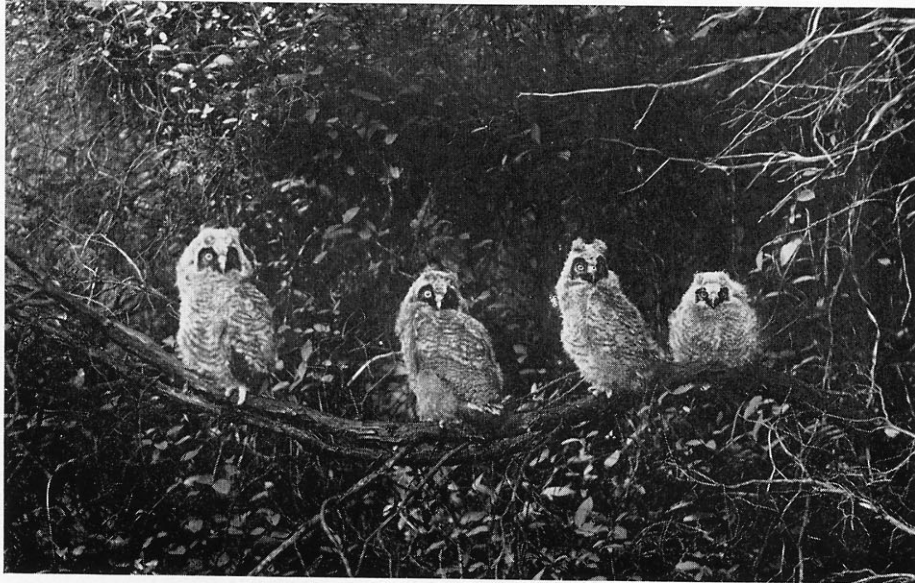
One of the young called in a loud, coarse voice from an oak tree a few yards away. It reminded me of the half grown bluejays that had been waking me each morning for the past week with their raucous cries. Occasionally it made a squeaky attempt that sounded somewhat similar to the "weck-weck-weck" of the mother. This same owl was a curious fellow, for when I squeaked to him he flew about me several times, approaching within a foot of my head; and as I later walked on to the nest site, he followed me, perching over my head when I finally stopped.

The following evening I returned with Mr. Potter. The plaintive calling commenced shortly after sundown and continued for the next hour and a half. As we stood at the edge of the wood an owl passed overhead, flying with deeply curving wings, erratically like a Night Hawk. At a distance of a half mile it joined its mate and the two flew in wavering circles, silhouetted against the fading sky and were lost to sight in the distance behind the black skeleton of a dead chestnut. From the tall trees came the sad hunger cry of the young.

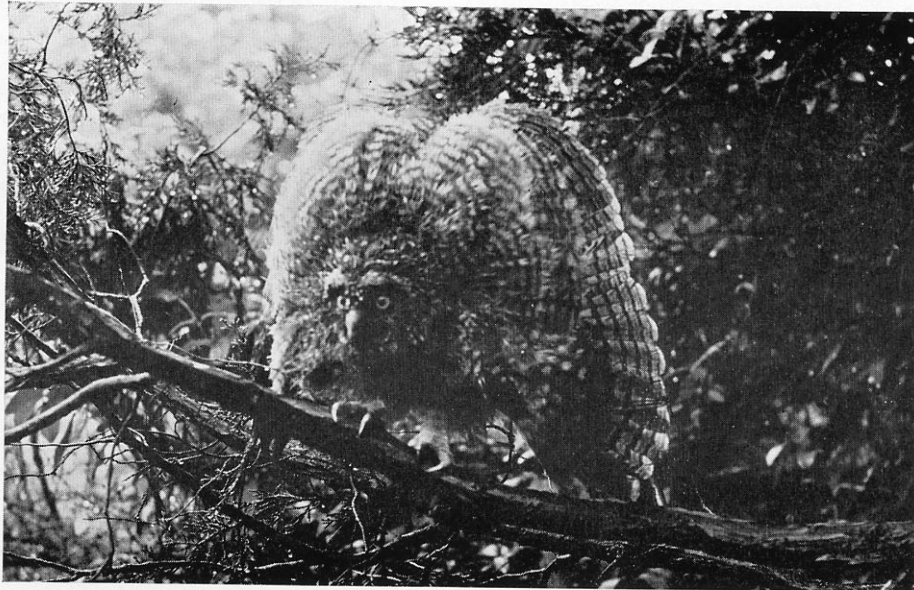
Two weeks later the woods were as silent as the wings of a lonely owl sailing forth to hunt. In the meadow the staccato chirp of the Henslow's Sparrows mingled with the buzz of grasshoppers and crickets.

Repeated visits to these woods during the winter of 1939 and 1940 revealed no owls.

Long-eared Owl, Burlington County, N. J.



Young about 2½ weeks old, May 18, 1939



A young bird 3 weeks old, photo made May 21.