

"A DIARY OF THE NESTING OF SAW-WHET OWLS
IN BUCKS COUNTY, PA."

(nesting approximately 1 mile North of Revere, Pennsylvania)

STEPHEN FARBOTNIK

March 13th, 1978—about 6:30

The Saw-Whet was heard for the first time. It sang its "coo-coo-coo" song for what seemed a half-hour without pause. I approached it through knee-deep snow to within 20 feet, and shined a flashlight on it for a moment. This did not cause the owl to stop singing. Just before the end of its singing, I heard a distant coo-coo-coo. This caused the owl to cease singing and fly in the direction of the distant voice. For the next 3 days, I listened but did not hear the bird.

March 17th, 1978—about 6:30 P.M.

The owl was heard cooing again. This time, it was found in a birdhouse made of a nail keg with a 3" opening mounted on a tree trunk cut off about 13 feet from the ground. It was singing while perched at the entrance to the birdhouse looking out. Was he calling for his (her) mate to come look?? Again, the flashlight did not make it stop its singing. The location was in an ash and oak stand of tall trees with very little underbrush, at least 200 feet from any evergreens.

March 18th, 1978—about 6:30 P.M.

When the singing was pursued this evening, the bird was found in a different birdhouse, but poised and singing in the same manner at the entrance. This birdhouse (the one that was subsequently used) was made of a hollow red maple mounted the same as the nail keg house. This location was in a mixture of ash, oak, and cedar. For the next ten days, I did not see the bird singing at the entrance again. Instead, it sang in the vicinity of the house and always in late dusk. Also, the singing seemed to be getting shorter each evening.

March 28th, 1978—about 7:00 P.M.

Climbed to the nest. Flushed a Saw-Whet and discovered 3 eggs. The bird flew to a perch only 10 feet from my head and remained there, silent. I watched from around 50 feet for about 10 or 15 minutes. It flew back into the house. It was during the next couple of evenings that I noticed that the singing was getting very soft. I had heard it clearly over 800 feet away in the beginning. Now it was barely audible at 50 feet. Also, some evenings I did not hear it at all.

April 4th, 1978—about 9:00 P.M.

5 eggs. The bird didn't sing.

April 5th and 6th, 1978

Bird did not sing.

April 7th, 1978

Bird did not sing. However, a bird was seen to leave the house at 7:05 A.M. and returned at 7:09 P.M.

April 8th, 1978

Bird did not sing.

April 9th, 1978—about 6:50 P.M.

Sang, for about 15 minutes! Without interrupting the song, flew up to the entrance singing on the wing. It stopped singing at entrance, perched only a second and flew off.

April 10th, 1978

Sang at approximately 7:00 and 9:10 P.M. Very softly and short, and on the wing approaching the house. I was to discover later that this was the manner in which the young were fed until almost full-grown.

April 11th, 1978

Short song at 6:52 P.M.

April 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th, 1978

Still five eggs.

April 21st, 1978—about 7:00 P.M.

An exciting event! No cooing was heard this evening. Suddenly, I heard a call I never heard before. I wrote then as sh (1/2 second) —sh (1/2 second) —sh (1/2 second) —sh (1 second) —sh—veet, with the "veet" ascending and explosive. This continued for about 3 minutes. I stood up to see what was happening. There at the base of the nest tree was cat! The cat spotted me at the same time as I saw it, and it ran off. The call was uttered for another half minute then stopped. I did not see this bird, but the bird in the peered out while the action was going on.

April 22nd and 23rd, 1978

Still five eggs. During this period, I discovered that the bird incubating during the day would leave the nest a little after 7:00 P.M. and return within 2 to 5 minutes. This was an excellent opportunity for taking pictures without disturbing the owls. I guessed that this was probably done to defecate and/or to remove any pellets disgorged during the day. The nest was very clean throughout this period.

April 24th, 1978—7:14 P.M.

The bird peeked out and for the first time, slipped back into the house. About 10 minutes later, it left. I climbed up and found the first chick. While taking a picture, I got hit on top of the head by one of the parents after 4 or 5 close passes.

April 25th, 1978

Still one chick.

April 26th, 1978

One bird left at 7:24 P.M. and returned at 7:27 P.M. The other bird coo'd two series of about 6 coo's and flew to the house at 7:48 P.M.

April 27th, 1978

Two chicks. She left at 7:21 P.M. and returned at 7:25 P.M.

April 28th, 1978

Adult left at 7:26 P.M. and returned at 7:30 P.M.

April 29th, 1978

Adult didn't leave until 8:45 P.M.! Three young and 2 hind halves of half-grown deer mice or white-footed mice in nest.

April 30, 1978—Daylight Savings Time

I didn't get to the nest till 8:25 P.M. At 8:28 P.M., a bird caught me taking a picture. Got hit very hard. It drew blood! 4 headless mice in nest (varying sizes).

May 1st, 1978

Adult left at 8:26 P.M. and returned at 8:29 P.M. 3 young and another egg has a hole in it. A moving beak could be seen.

May 2nd, 1978

Adult left at 8:20 P.M., returning at 8:23 P.M. 4 young. Oldest's eyes are open.

May 3rd, 1978

Adult left at 8:27 P.M., returning at?? Only 3 young birds—youngest one disappeared. One whole mouse and 3 headless half-grown mice. The nest was a deep bowl depressed into cedar-bark material. I thought perhaps the little one was suffocated by the larger birds (or eaten?).

May 4th, 1978

Raining, didn't wait for bird to leave. Flushed it and didn't get hit. 3 young birds. One whole little mouse. I pressed down sides of nest to flatten out the whole bottom to prevent another possible suffocation.

May 5th, 1978

Drizzle. Flushed adult. Three young. No mice.

May 6th, 1978

Arrived there late. Flushed the adult. Still three young.

May 7th, 1978

Still three young. I shook last egg and found it watery. Removed the egg. As I approached the house up the ladder, I almost touched the adult at the hole. The other bird was about 15 feet behind me and sang coo-coo-coo, three soft notes. Hardly an alarm call. They must know me by now!

May 8th, 1978

Oldest young clacking bills. One mouse in the nest.

May 9th, 1978

Adult left at 8:36 P.M., returning at 8:40 P.M. White "V" and reddish-brown sides becoming apparent on oldest. No mice in nest.

May 10th, 1978

Number 2 shows signs of the "V" also, and is clacking. Number 2 is three days younger than Number 1, but started clacking one day sooner.

May 11th, 1978

Adult left at 8:43 P.M., and returning at 8:51 P.M. (Long absence.) Number 3 clacking! Do they learn by imitating? For the first time I found pellets in nest. No mice.

May 12th, 1978

Adult left at 8:25 P.M. I didn't wait for return. All standing up. One pellet.

May 13th, 1978

One mouse.

May 14th, 1978

Adult left at 8:31 P.M. and returned at 8:44 P.M. Number 1 primaries about 1 inch long.

May 15th, 1978

Adult left at 8:16 P.M. and returned at 8:20 P.M. No mice.

May 16th, 1978

This was the first time that an adult bird did not spend the day in the nest. Waited till 8:45 P.M. No mice. Checked again at 10:45 P.M. One-half eaten mouse.

May 17th, 1978

Checked the nest in daylight this morning. No adult. Also no mice. They won't be eating during the day.

May 19th, 1978

No mice around 8:00 P.M. Checked again at 11:00 P.M. No mice. Worried. Checked at 1:00 A.M. 2 mice! PHEW!!!

May 20th, 1978

Recorded with G. Reynard's equipment at base of tree about 2:00 A.M. One of the adults swooped down on me uttering an alarm call 3 times. I was lying in a blind looking up with only my head sticking out.

May 21st, 1978

Number 1 sitting at entrance today during the day

May 22nd, 1978

One mouse. Recorded a delivery of another mouse. This is done while bird is cooing.

May 23rd, 1978

Tied a Chihuahua dog at base of tree for reaction just before dark. Got the same alarm call I got on the 20th. Sounds like a Greater Yellow-Legs' call, but more explosive and harsher and descending in pitch.

May 25th, 1978

Recorded 3 feedings: First, 9:19 P.M.; Second, 9:50 P.M.; and third at 1:24 A.M. Flying Squirrel landed on house. Heard the clacking and flew off.

May 26th, 1978

One mouse in house at 8:00 P.M. George Reynard tried recording for 1½ hours. Nothing! Checked nest at 10:30 P.M. Number 1 had left!! Sometime between 8:00 P.M. and 10:30 P.M.

May 27th, 1978

Between Noon and 5:00 P.M., Number 2 left. (in Daylight) The adult call changed from that time to cooo-cooo-cooo-cooo, the last cooo ascending. Young answered, tweeting.

May 30th, 1978

At 8:00 A.M. this morning, Number 3 was still in house. At 10:45 P.M., the nest was empty.