LEAVING THE NEST

A RARE GLIMPSE AT A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF A FAMILY OF GREAT GRAY OWLS

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At 18 m above the ground, balanced on two long, sharp spurs jabbed into the rough bark of a tall, nearly limbless black poplar tree, I was scared. Sweating and trembling with fatigue, I kept muttering to myself, "Never again, never again!" This was higher than I had ever been on climbing irons before. The combination of inching my way up the slim tree, which was swaying in the breeze, and the long, hot day during which Herb Copland and I had driven more than 600 km from Winnipeg to Wabowden, Manitoba, brought me closer to the edge of exhaustion than I was willing to admit. It was about 6:00 p.m., 30 May 1981; we were at our second Great Gray Owl nest that afternoon, thanks to Dan Chranowski, Wildlife Technician from Thompson, who led us to the nests. So far, this is the farthest north in Manitoba that we have banded Great Gray Owls.

Great Gray Owls, like many other owls, nest in old stick nests built by hawks and ravens. They bring nothing to the nest, relying on whatever deserted or vacant structure they can find. Accordingly, they occupy nests at varying heights, from 7 to 16 m or more. This particular active nest had been discovered in late spring during logging operations. Now the young were large enough to band. The nest tree, actually the only whole standing tree for about 450 m around, had been left uncut at the order of Len Hercum, foreman of the logging operation. Black spruce, balsam fir and jack pine had been cut and hauled away for pulp, but trunks and branches of unwanted poplar trees littered the ground.

Nero climbing to nest
Dan Chranowski

This owl family had somehow adjusted to the noise and activity of men and machines while an entire forest was cut out from around them.

When we arrived at the nest tree, the female was perched nearby on the top of a tall, slender snag, watching anxiously as we made our preparations. We could see at least one young owl in the nest, but the male was nowhere in sight. We guessed that he was far away, hunting for voles and other small mammals to feed the growing owlets.

Leaning back into my safety belt, just below the large nest, which contained three partly-feathered young, I began to unwind the rope I had brought up with me so that the young could be lowered to the ground. Then I concentrated on the problem of getting first one and then a second struggling, hissing, bill-snapping owlet into a cloth bag. Suddenly there was a shout from below. As I looked up, the female flew in and perched on a small limb less than 1 m from me.

Lowering nestlings in bag
Dan Chranowski

She and I stared mutely at each other; seconds later she flew back to her original perch. Although relatively docile in the nest vicinity, compared to many other birds of prey, Great Gray Owls can be belligerent in defense of their young. It is the female that is the aggressor and one has to watch her closely, for she can be a dangerous foe. Usually we can tell from a bird's behaviour when it is getting ready to attack, and one person always is supposed to keep an eye on the female.

When I straightened up to reach for the third young owl, I was surprised to find the nest empty. Without my knowing it, the third owlet had jumped out and fluttered safely down to the ground. My companions had assumed that I'd seen this happen and so hadn't said anything.

I lowered the bagged young to the ground, then started climbing down with some relief, knowing that since the young clearly were ready to leave the nest, I wouldn't have to climb back up to replace them. Ordinarily, Great Gray Owl nestlings leave the nest at 3 to 4 weeks of age. By the time they are this old they are belligerent nest mates, shoving and bill-snapping at each other. Rarely, a nestling may be forced out over the edge of the nest, but young at this age usually survive. In one case, at a nest east of Winnipeg, a young owl which fell to the ground from a nest about 14 m above ground, stayed at the base of the nest tree where it continued to be fed. It actually grew at a faster rate than did its nest mates.

Although young Great Gray Owls are unable to fly when they leave the nest, their flight feathers are partly grown and aid them in dropping safely on that first flight to the ground. This is one of the hazards facing a species that uses old nests sometimes located at a considerable height. The highest nest to come to my attention was one

Nero and Copland with young owls *Dan Chranowski*

at Pickle Lake, Ontario; it was slightly over 20 m above the ground. For young owls, that's a long way down. To avoid ground predators, the female leads the young away from the nest tree until they find a stump or leaning tree that they can climb to get above ground. The young owls have strong feet and are good climbers, ascending to considerable heights at this early age. Not only can they climb slanted trunks, but they can make their way up vertical trees, pulling themselves up over limbs by using their bill, head and neck, flapping their little wings for balance.

While the female watched closely from nearby perches, we banded the young owls. Then Herb stationed himself at a suitable poplar snag and I stood nearby, holding one young and teasing it until it hissed and bill-snapped, trying to bring the female in closer. Soon she landed on the top of the snag above Herb, whereupon he captured her by means of a 6-m fishing pole with a wire snare at the tip. Snaring doesn't hurt the owl as the heavy neck feathers ensure that the snare isn't drawn too tightly. We rarely catch the male, for he is shy and seldom comes close.

We held the female for about 20 minutes, recording a series of measurements including state of molt, weight and other traits. When released, she flew slowly to a low perch about 16 m from the nest tree. Obviously overheated and suffering slightly from stress, she sat panting, both wings spread out and drooping. This happens especially on warm days, but handling the female seems to have no lasting effect.

It was now about 45 minutes since we had arrived; we were standing 20 m from the nest tree watching the

Herb Copland about to snare female owl *Dan Chranowski*

Female owl banded and tagged *Dan Chranowski*

female on the left and the young to the right on low perches where I had placed them, preparing to pick up our gear and leave. At that moment, the male owl appeared at about 300 m away, beating rapidly towards the nest tree, wings bowed like a heron's. Of course, as far as the male was concerned the young were still in the nest, and he was coming to deliver a vole to the female on the edge of the nest. Because all the trees had been cut down, we were able to observe his flight from distant hunting grounds, something we'd not previously seen. Ordinarily he would have been making his way through heavy forest. The male's rate of speed and direct flight up to the edge of the nest was an exciting sight. When he landed on the edge of the nest above us, I said, "Don't move!", suddenly realizing that we were watching an extraordinary experimental situation. We were confronted with a circumstance that must have occurred often over thousands of years — that moment when, in the absence of the hunting male, the young have dropped to the ground and the female is no longer attentive to the nest. We watched the whole scene intently.

Perched on the edge of the nest, the male paused, obviously surprised by the lack of birds in or at the nest. I sensed his indecision and almost held my breath to see what he would do next. He swung his head sharply, first to one side and then the other, peering down into the empty nest, disturbed by a situation so different from his last visit. The male suddenly began calling, giving a double-noted *"ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh"*, repeated about 20 times. This is the male's anxiety call, often given when the female is disturbed and off the nest. Usually the call ceases the moment the female returns to the nest. But, up to now, neither the female nor the young had made any sound. The vole still dangl-

Male owl leaving for food *Dan Chranowski*

ing from his bill, the male next gave a series of strongly accented hooting notes, emphatic and demanding. At this, one of the young on a low perch gave a single food-begging call, a rasping, high-pitched *"sherr-rick!"* At once the male dropped off his high perch, adroitly angling down to the ground to land on a low limb about 3 m from the young which had called. The young bird repeated the begging call, and then hurried towards the male, making its way surprisingly quickly, hopping and stumbling over limbs, until it stood in front of the male. The male leaned forward and offered the vole to the owlet — but nothing happened! This was evidently too new for the owlet to apprehend; it was still used to being fed by the female. As long as the young are in the nest, the male (sole provider of food for the female and young) brings prey to the female who then feeds the young. Once the young are out of the nest, however, the male begins to feed the young directly, flying to each one in turn, wherever it may be perched, usually going to whichever one begs the loudest.

At this time the female, about 100 m away, still on her stump, gave a comfort shake, expanding all her body plumage, then heavily shaking her body and head — a sure sign that she had recovered from her over-anxious state. She then gave the female food-begging call, a louder and more strident version of the begging call of the young; this was followed by intensive begging, a rapid series of low, melodic notes related to a similar call given by excited young nestling owls, a kind of chirping. Almost with her first call, the male flew to her, landing on a fallen tree only 1 m away, the vole still in his bill. The female, chirping rapidly, edged towards her mate, her back feathers raised, head low, bill foremost. When she reached him, he bent towards her and she pulled the vole from his bill. With the food exchange made, the male at once flew off across the open site, heading back in the direction from which he had come.

The female held the vole for a few seconds, then, tilting her head back, with three gulping movements swallowed it, whereupon she seemed to gain new strength, standing upright with wings in place, a picture of relaxed comfort.

Marvellous! Not knowing what

would happen in these particular circumstances, and owing to the lack of any cover, we were able to observe the entire sequence of events. I was left with the feeling that we had shared a privileged opportunity to see in detail what happens when a hunting male returns with food and finds a portion of his world in upheaval. The nestlings, abruptly displaced and yet in a condition that they shortly faced in any case, and the female, temporarily exhausted and initially unwilling or unable to respond to the food-bearing male, kept the male in suspense for longer than is probably normal. But in the end, the adaptive behaviour of these birds provided a relatively smooth ending to an uncertain situation.

Although flightless when they leave the nest, young owls have strong feet and are good climbers *Dan Chranowski*