

OWLS IN OUR FARMYARD

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In the fall of 1976, we moved to our present farmstead 4 mi. southwest of Assiniboia Saskatchewan. It wasn't long before we realised that we were sharing our quarter section of land, which included a large yard surrounded by a shelterbelt, with two Great Horned Owls. They made an appearance annually about mid-January to begin their courtship. Many evenings and early mornings our sleep would be interrupted by the soft and also not-so-soft hootings coming from the trees. We were impressed with their great balancing act as they liked to perch on the very top of the tallest trees. Their courtship went on for about 6 weeks, followed by their nesting. We made no observations of their nesting places for the first few years.

During the construction of a quonset in our yard, the owls would occasionally choose to fly in through the open end of the building and spend the night roosting on the rafters. They were quite content to stay when we walked into the building, but were frightened into flight by any loud or sharp sound. In one instance, one of the owls was disturbed from its midday snooze by the sound of a car door being shut; it immediately flew out the opposite end of the building, flying directly through a window, apparently unharmed, leaving us to gather up broken pieces of glass and to replace a window.

In 1984 we became "owl watchers" in earnest. Following their usual pattern, the owls arrived on the scene in mid-January. Following the 6 weeks of courting, they chose for a nesting place a roofless magpie nest which was situated in trees at the front of our yard, easily visible from our living-room window. We watched with a certain amount of anxiety and

trepidation as the female clung to the nest, day after day, through typical March weather of snow, wind, sleet and rain. We observed the rapid growth of the two owlets as their heads gradually appeared over the top of the nest. Soon the mother had to move off the nest as the accommodations became crowded. We noted the first hesitant moves of the young owls away from the nest and their attempts to fly — first to a nearby branch and then to another tree, and so on. One owl seemed to be the older, stronger or more aggressive, and the other liked to remain in the nest a few days longer.

We expected when they learned to fly they would move elsewhere. However, such was not the case, as they liked their surroundings, though there was very little left of the nest by this time. They were now quite self sufficient and able to hunt their own food, and the parents left the yard area.

During the hot, dry summer of 1984 we had many grasshoppers in our yard. The young owls liked to spend evenings, with the aid of the yard light, waddling through the grass and gobbling grasshoppers. We had placed small containers (hand wash basin size) of water on the grass for the use of other birds in the yard. On one occasion, in the early morning, one of the owls decided it was a good place to have a bath and there it stood in the middle of this small dish, taking up all the space, flipping a bit of moisture under its wings and perhaps washing its feet. On yet another occasion, the same type of container held only a small amount of water and the owls shared a drink, with one owl carefully tipping the basin with its foot while the other drank. By November the young owls had left our yard.

In 1985 the parents found another magpie nest to their liking near the 1984 nest. It, too, no longer had a roof of twigs. Once again, two owls were hatched and we began our "peeping Tom" observations with and without binoculars. The summer of 1985 was again dry, with an overabundance of grasshoppers and these young owls followed the same pattern as those of the previous year, as they hopped through the grass in the evenings devouring grasshoppers. These owls showed no interest in the containers of water (at least that we observed). The owls, in their attempts to learn to fly, would not always make graceful landings, and on one occasion, one owl was observed clinging to a branch in a bat-like position. Within a minute or two the bird did manage to right itself.

As 1985 drew to a close once again the yard was "owl-less." As well, there did not appear to be any suitable nest in the

same area of the yard that would lure the owls in 1986. We recalled reading that owls would nest in boxes placed in trees. As an experiment, a sturdy wooden box (measuring 28 x 28 x 6') was constructed, complete with drain holes, twigs and grass and installed firmly in a tree, 14 ft. above the ground. Once again, the "old timers" returned to the yard in mid-January, and as before serenaded many evenings with their hooting calls. They noticed the box and would perch on nearby trees, surveying the situation. On 5 March the female appeared on the man-made nest, 1 day earlier than the observed nesting date in 1985. The female is easily able to snuggle down in the nest during the day and seems to have a little more protection from the elements. We are, of course, hoping for a successful hatching again this year. How many more years will we be fortunate to have the two adults return each January?



Great Horned Owl feeding young at man-made nest

Lorne Scott