

BANDING ADULT GREAT HORNED OWLS IN THE EDMONTON AREA

WOLFGANG H. HOFFMANN, 133 Kaskitayo Court, Edmonton, Alberta. T6J 3T3

Since the spring of 1966, when I first photographed Great Horned Owls at their nest, it became increasingly apparent to me that they preferred to return to specific woodlots to nest year after year. It also appeared that the same individuals came back time and time again. That evidence suggested that this was not a coincidence? At first it was nothing more than a strong feeling. But before long, subtle, yet recognizable, behavior traits identified individuals. Sometimes coloration or unique markings strengthened my suspicions, particularly when close-up photos of the birds were possible. At the same time, I also knew that feather color changed and faded progressively with age. So, something more conclusive was needed, i.e. banding, to show, beyond a doubt, what was thought to be happen-

Many thousands of Great Horned Owls have been banded by banders in Alberta, Saskatchewan and elsewhere over the years. Most, however, have been nestlings. Adult owls, being more difficult to band, have only been banded incidentally in the past. To my knowledge, there has been a long-term effort to band nestlings and adults on territories.

Hardy Pletz, who has banded Great Horned Owls near Edmonton for almost 20 years, has also noticed that owls tend to occupy favorite woodlots year after year. He strongly suspected the same woodlots to be involved. He thought that it would be possible to capture the adult owls at their nest as they attacked, particularly the larger and more aggressive females. The first female owl he managed to capture and band landed on the nest

while he was peering over the opposite side. Using a modified salmon landing net, he was able to scoop her up during a split second distraction on her part. With practice, he soon became adept at scooping the incoming owls out of the air the instant before they struck him. Before long he was even catching the fleetest goshawks as they attempted to dislodge him from their nest tree.

The first evidence came from an area on the southeastern outskirts of Edmonton, Alberta (Colchester School Woodlot) occupied by a nesting female owl with a distinctively nasty disposition. Without hesitation, she would invariably strike anyone climbing the nest tree. "She has been there for at least nine years (prior to 1987), as far as I can remember," figured Hardy. It was just a feeling he had, because he really did not know for sure.

In 1987, as usual, she attacked. She was caught and banded along with her three nestlings. The male hooted and clacked his bill from a distance, but did not attack, just as he had always done (if indeed it was the same male).

The nest deteriorated through the summer, with the wear and tear it got during the nesting period helped by strong winds. That fall a wire basket was installed to replace the original nest. The new platform was comprised of green twigs laced through the mesh along with a matrix of interwoven dead boughs — a typical raptor nest, only better. In late winter a pair of Great Horned Owls appeared. The female used the man-made structure, laying three eggs.



Man-made, wire basket nest in use, spring 1988

W.H. Hoffmann

When the young were sufficiently developed, Hardy climbed the tree in order to band them. More importantly, he hoped to capture the hen to see if it was the same bird that had returned. As usual, she struck before he was even halfway up to the nest. She was caught, and lo and behold, she carried the band from the previous spring!

A lot of questions remain unanswered ... How many seasons had this bird been coming back to that "home" woodlot? How many more years would she continue to nest there? Was our observation an isolated incident, or do other horned owls behave the same way? Where would this owl go if this stand of mature black poplar was cut down like so many other patches of bush in the area? Was her mate the same one she was with in previous years? Would another pair take up residency in this woodlot if something happened to either one of this pair? Ob-

viously all of these questions could not be answered immediately. But by banding both territorial adults and recapturing them over a number of years, answers to some of the questions would gradually be forthcoming. Ideally, it would be useful to obtain recapture information from a territorial adult that had been first banded as a nestling. Such a find would be luckiest of all.

A second recapture last spring (1988) helped confirm our belief that these owls have a specific "home address" where they choose to nest. In 1987 Hardy Pletz banded an adult female Great Horned Owl at a nest southeast of Ft. Saskatchewan, Alberta. The following year the owls did not nest there; instead, it was later learned that presumably the same birds had used an old Red-tailed Hawk nest in the adjoining section to the southeast. In 1989 a pair was once again back in the identical nest occupied in 1987. Hardy managed to catch the female on the fly as she attacked him. She carried the 1987 band!

In 1987 the male had also attacked but it had been too windy to risk a capture attempt. Again, in 1989, he was aggressive and this time he was caught and banded. Pletz now has 20 adult Great Horned Owls banded on territories; for some he has productivity information dating back a number of years. In 1987 alone, he banded 10 adults. In most instances only the larger, more aggressive female would attack, but twice he caught the male defending the nest site.

Hardy now realizes that a bit more can be learned about the biology of Great Horned Owls from marked adults than from all the nestlings he has banded over the last 15 years. Band returns from young owls often result from the death of the bird. A greater return from the banding effort is realized when a live bird can be identified year after year on the same territory.



male Great Horned Owl caught for banding

Hardy Pletz

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE TAKES HOUSE SPARROW

ARDON G. GRAHAM, Box 75, Group 7, R.R.# 1C, Winnipeg, Manitoba. R3C 2E4

approximately 10:00 a.m. on 15 October 1989, (my wife) Darlene, (son) Marshall, and I were sitting at the table usually watching the birds at our back-

yard feeder 11 km north of Winnipeg and between PTH #9 and the Red River. Of the 18 or 20 birds present, half, or more, were House Sparrows, largely immatures;