

THE GREAT BARN OWL CAPER

by David E. Clapp, Marshfield

The telephone call on September 19 seemed a bit preposterous. I am used to calls that misrepresent natural phenomena, but this one was from Jim Baird, head of Natural History Services at Massachusetts Audubon Society. He suggested that a group, family, or other assemblage of Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) was trapped within a chicken-wire tube attached to the inside of the pillars supporting the steeple spire of the lovely Christopher Wren Church (First Church of Christ) in Sandwich. After promising Jim that I would take care of the report, I mulled over a variety of responses: I could visit; I could call a birder in the area; I could call the church officials; or I could call the police. I decided to do all of these.

The police recorded the call. They informed me that there was free access for the birds and that there was nothing to worry about. The church officials and the Cape Cod birder were not available, so I grabbed my kids and headed for Sandwich. We arrived at the center of town and saw the first of several birders awaiting the owls' evening performance. It became apparent that birdwatchers knew of the owls and that there had been many people there to see them. We awaited the 7:15 P.M. squawking that announced the beginning of the alleged evening forays. The kids visited the duck pond, and several other birders arrived. By 7:15 P.M., the twenty people gathered heard the first squawks of the owls. It soon became clear that the birds were not flying to and from the steeple but were, in fact, enclosed in a chicken-wire tube. The noise and vertical activity of the owls was a method of attracting attention from the outside rather than an effort to wish each other luck as they departed on hunting trips.

There was one person among us who was not a birder. He was Rick Lawrence, a trustee of the church. I approached him and we discussed the situation. The church steeple had been painted this summer, and the painters had put the chicken wire in place to relieve a perceived pigeon roosting problem. I concluded that the painters had inadvertently fenced in the owls. We decided that the wire must be removed at some point to allow better access for the parents to feed the young or for the large young birds to exit into the world and take up their lives. We felt that a climb into the steeple might be difficult in the dark, for there is no electricity, and it is, at best, an awkward climb. However, we could find no better time to meet again for the rescue. We located a flashlight and decided to forge ahead.

The climb up to the steeple tower started in the choir loft of the church - a simple, almost stark place that offers nothing to detract from the sermon, a place with the simple elegance of Shaker furniture. From the loft, the climb goes

like this: a ladder to another ladder, a scamper across beams to another ladder to a trap door, through the trap door onto an old roof, a crawl along this angled roof under the bell and over the beams supporting it. The next part is a bit redundant: up a ladder to a platform, up another ladder to another platform, up another ladder to a trap door, and then through this onto a small floor. This floor is surrounded by a five-foot-high wall that made me feel as if I were in the gondola of a balloon. On the top of this wall are eight ten-foot columns that hold up the twenty-foot spire of the steeple. It was a nice climb in the night, what with adrenalin flowing and a mission. There was a sense of strength and power in the ladders, beams, and bell. I made the same climb two days later and, in the daylight, noticed that the sense of strength and majesty was missing. It was just plain scary in the light of day!

As we arrived at the last trap door, there was a scurrying and scratching as the birds moved about. When I lifted the door a few inches to get my bearings and to plan my entrance, I was met by three monkey-faced owls lined up about six inches from my nose. Our close relationship lasted only a few seconds. When I pushed through the doorway and hauled out on the unkempt floor of the gondola, three of the birds went straight up in the chicken-wire tube, and a fourth retreated under the scalloped edge of an interior wall and disappeared. Rick (sensibly below floor level) and I decided to tear open a corner of one of the wired sections to allow for access and egress. With adrenalin doing most of the work, I ripped open a section of wire that was about three feet across at the bottom and went to a point about four feet above the edge. As the gondola was five feet deep and the wire covered the spaces between the pillars (ten feet tall and three feet wide), I was able to make nothing more than an isosceles triangle and hope for the best. I took one tour around the gondola and found on its ledge a smorgasbord of mice and starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) on the outside of the wire. It was apparent by the decay and desiccation that one or both parents had been bringing food for weeks and leaving it to be pulled through the wire by the incarcerated owls. The three owls above me were quite active, although one of them eventually dropped down and crawled under the inside wall and sought refuge out of sight. Use of the same tactic to avoid the painters had probably resulted in the owls' captivity.

After arriving back on the ground and describing what had happened, I got promises from people to give me a call the next night to tell me whether there were more, less, or no owls around the steeple. Word came; there were none! My assumption was that the fledged birds had flown through the opening and had immediately begun depleting the vole population of Sandwich. I called the minister the next morning and offered to come down and inspect the site, close up the wire, and discuss the whole affair. He agreed, and I soon again

made the climb to the steeple. The double-walled gondola offered a spectacular view, and with more time to spend, I assessed the owl nest site. The owls were all gone. There was no scratching, fluttering, or squawking as I crawled around looking behind each wall section. It appeared that they had all gotten out the first night they had had the chance. There were hundreds of bones, broken pellets, and sundry fragments scattered about the floor and between the walls. I had the feeling that this site might have been used previously, although no one knew for certain. I took photographs of the cadaverous buffet and some of the pellets and descended again after pulling and tacking the chicken wire in place. The prey items that had remained on the ledge after the heavy rains of the previous night were two starlings and nine meadow voles. From the ground it became apparent that there were many, many more carcasses on the ledges of the steeple. They had washed off or simply fallen over during the time that the birds were inside the steeple.

The most interesting aspect of this story is the speculation about the composition of the jailed family. There could easily have been four barn owl young. Bent reports instances of eleven eggs and cites six as an average figure. It is also known that Barn Owl eggs are incubated as they are laid and that the young are in varying stages of growth within the same nest. The oldest might eat the youngest if he had the chance or needed the food. Thus, the four owls in the steeple could all have been siblings well fed by two parents who had flown off at the arrival of the painting crew. They could also have been one parent and three young who had been trapped inside as the parent incubated or sheltered the young. Let's work back from the dates we know. The owls were first pointed out to the church officials on September 14. They flew off on the night of September 20. The painter had finished his work and was paid on May 13. On May 18, he was reminded to finish the chicken wire, and this was done either on the weekend of May 21 (church secretary) or on Memorial Day weekend (church trustee). Thus, we have the birds wired in for June, July, August, and three weeks in September!

Barn Owls at this latitude probably nest in late April and lay eggs in early May. With a three-week incubation period, these birds could very well have had newly-hatched young when the wire was put in place. I feel that the young would have been mobile and feathered in order to get the food from the ledge five feet above them, or that one of the parents was also wired in. I also feel that the four birds I saw were three siblings and one parent. This means that the buffet on the outside ledge was set by one parent, the food transferred by another parent, and the young raised from beginning to end within the wire cage.

The birds would have been difficult to observe or even to notice in mid-summer. It takes about eight weeks for the birds to grow to a size where fledging is imminent. Our

birds would have been ready to fledge by early to mid-August. As they grew older, stronger, and more vocal, it became more likely they would be noticed by passing humans. However, there is one other factor. With daylight savings time in effect, the light would not have diminished before eight o'clock until late August. It appears that the noise is stimulated by increasing darkness, and the birds were not noisy at a reasonable hour until September. Also by September even the youngest bird was ready to fly, and the noise increased. Thus, they were fed in their cell for more than a month after they would normally have fledged.

There are many members of the church and its trustees who wish to open a small portion of the screen between one set of pillars and allow access to the birds next year. After all, the wire was put up to alleviate a pigeon problem, and the owls do that as well as watch over starlings, rats, and mice.

DAVID E. CLAPP is director of the South Shore Regional Office of the Massachusetts Audubon Society and tour leader for the Natural History Services. He has contributed several articles to BOEM.

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