

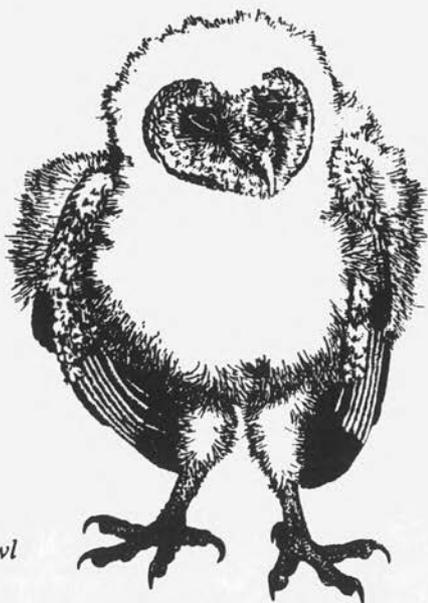
BARN OWLS NESTING ON NANTUCKET

by Edith F. Andrews

Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) have nested successfully on Nantucket since 1987, when Granger Frost provided housing on his property on Madket Road. In 1985 he placed a nest box in an old barn. This was not occupied until July 1987, when Frost discovered a nest with six eggs. All hatched and were subsequently banded.

In 1988 the owls again nested successfully and raised two broods in the barn box with a total of nine young banded. In 1989 Frost placed a nest box in the attic of his house. Almost immediately, this was occupied by a pair of Barn Owls. The barn and house nests raised two broods each, with a total of twenty young banded. In 1990 two broods were raised in the house box and one in the barn box, with a total of fourteen young banded. In summary, through 1990 forty-nine young and one adult were banded, and in early April 1991 both nest sites were again occupied.

On April 24, 1991, I received a call from the owner of a houseboat moored in Polpis Harbor. As he boarded the boat, he saw what looked to be an owl go under the bed. The owner discovered a nest with two young and one egg situated below an open window that had blown out during the winter. He was anxious to get the boat ready for summer occupancy and hoped we could move the owls to another location. We were not sure whether human disturbance had caused the owls to desert the nest, but a check on May 2 found three live owlets and four eggs. The nest was obviously still in use, although no parent was in sight. The



Young Barn Owl

Sketch by Scott Hecker

nest consisted of mouse fur piled on a throw rug, and two dead voles (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) were off to one side.

We decided to move the owlets to a nest box on the shore of Medowie Creek and hoped that the parents would find them. A call to Donal O'Brien in New York City resulted in permission to place the box on his property. What is more, he offered to have a platform and box made at his expense and to give the project "top priority." Meanwhile the owner of the houseboat was given permission to tie up to a pier near the nest box.

We arranged to move the baby owls to their new home on shore at 7:00 P.M. on May 10. When the owner and a friend entered the houseboat, they found four baby owls and two eggs. There was no sign of either parent. The babies were placed in a canvas bag and covered with a soft towel. The eggs were placed in a cloth bag, and the rug with the nest on it was placed in a cardboard box. (The owner of the houseboat kindly donated the rug to the cause.) The rug went into the nest box first, then the eggs, and then the four young, which were still too young to band. The nest box was closed, the ladder removed, and we stood around enjoying the evening, discussing the situation and hoping that the parents would find their young. The boat owners were anxious to start cleaning up the mess in the houseboat. Excrement and owl pellets were everywhere. Soon after they entered the houseboat, the call came that an owl was on board. The owl was captured and found to be wearing a band. We read the number, took measurements, and found a brood patch. We then climbed up to the nest box and put her in. She made no attempt to fly out but went right to the young and stood there with them. We could not have asked for a better ending. A subsequent check of the band number showed that the parent was banded as a nestling in the house box on October 15, 1989.

The next day, I received a call from the caretaker of a house in Quaise. He found two Barn Owls inside the house in which he had left a window partly open, hoping the squirrels that had gotten in would leave without chewing the window frames. He had already replaced quite a few window frames from squirrel damage. I made a careful examination of the house looking for signs of nesting but found no evidence of eggs or young. From the number of pellets and the amount of excrement, it seemed that the owls had been occupying the house for about a week. Incidentally, the house was reconstructed from an old barn and has a big open space with a high ceiling, rafters, and a balcony along one side. When we entered the house, the owls flew around overhead from one rafter to another, finally settling in an upstairs bedroom.

We arranged to return later with dip net, mist net, and banding equipment to capture the owls and move them to the owl house of a nearby friend. This nest box is located in woods in Squam and has never been occupied by owls. We were unable to contact the owners as they were off-island, but we decided to

release the owls there anyway in the hope that they would find the nest box. The owls were still in the bedroom and, by blocking the doorway, we were able to capture them with the dip net. We found that both of these birds were wearing bands and that they were male and female. The male was banded as a nestling in Frost's barn box on July 15, 1990, and the female was banded as a nestling in the house box on October 13, 1990. We were unable to put the owls directly into the owl house because we did not have a ladder to get up to the entrance. When released, the birds flew off into the woods and were immediately mobbed by crows.

On May 16 I received a call from the owner of a boat in Polpis Harbor in which a pair of Barn Owls were attempting to nest. The boat had drifted ashore during the winter and was marooned on a sandbar. When the tide and wind changed, the boat tipped from port to starboard. There was evidence of a nest on a coil of rope under a bench seat on the port side. Pellets, whitewash, and eggs were scattered across the deck. The boat was aground on a sandbar, but at very high tide and in a strong wind it would roll, causing some eggs to be broken.

The next day, at low tide, we walked to the boat. As we approached, one owl flew off. Another owl was under the seat, standing on the coil of rope. The owl did not move, and we left quickly so as not to disturb it but not before noticing that it was wearing a band. There was no sign of young in the nest. The next day Frost and a friend were able to capture this owl and read the band number. It was banded as a nestling in the house box on June 19, 1990. After reading the band number, the owl was released on the boat and remained under the seat. Only one owl was seen on this day.

We decided to transfer this owl to our home in Madaket where there is a nest box mounted on a shed. Actually the nest box is a well-built doghouse that was found at the dump. By reducing the size of the entrance and turning it around, the doghouse was deemed suitable as a Barn Owl nest box. On May 22, at low tide, we met in Polpis Harbor with the necessary gear for capture and quietly approached the boat, only to find it empty.

On June 7 we visited the Medowie Creek nest box where we found four young owlets, old enough to be banded. They were banded, weighed, measured, and returned to the nest box. At a later date adults were observed flying in and out of the box. Thus, the move from houseboat to nest box on shore was considered a success.

As of August 1991, sixty-five Barn Owls have been banded on Nantucket. With the advent of the nest boxes, the species continues to make a strong comeback on the island.

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