

THE HINSDALE HAWK OWL  
By Robert P. Yunick

This winter many a birder in the Northeast has thrilled to the sight of a very cooperative hawk owl along route 143 near Hinsdale, Mass. According to Rudd Stone of the Holyoke Bird Club, the bird was first reported on January 17, 1965. Because of the bird's diurnal nature and love of open perches on the topmost branches of the taller trees in the area, the bird has generally been seen readily from an automobile from the highway. My first sight of the bird was on February 7 when a group of us from the Schenectady Bird Club took over one-half hour to locate the bird in the rain. Finally, it was found perched atop a television aerial. All the other groups from our club found the bird almost immediately on arrival.

Of course a bander cannot look at such a sight for very long without longing to capture and band such a prize. With band permit arrangements made, Walt Sabin and I drove to Hinsdale late in February on a crisp, cold winter afternoon. It was an uncertain, agonizing 70-mile ride - it was Walt's third trip and my second to the area. With us we carried a Bal-Chatri trap tied with 30-lb. nylon nooses, and in a gathering cage we had four starlings. Our late afternoon arrival was planned, hopefully, to coincide with the bird's hunting schedule.

Our faithful friend was located very quickly atop a tall elm. However, before the trap could be baited with two starlings, the owl flew back over the hill that we had just passed. Retracing our path down the road, we located the owl on an apple tree. Shortly the owl was perched on the top-most branch of a lone, dead tree in an abandoned pasture further down the road. Between us and the owl stood a glaring array of "no trespassing" signs. It was at this point that we met the Philip T. Whites on whose posted property the owl perched.

Permission to enter the property to attempt to capture the bird was emphatically denied. I learned how birder and bander alike had contributed to the erecting of the posted signs. The Whites had erected these signs in self-defense and in defense of the owl whose welfare concerned them. They had become disgusted with the groups of people who tramped the fields adjacent to their house without permission; who broke fences on the property; and the group who came with a "cage" with something live in it - a "cage" which was placed near the owl and at which the owl swooped, but did not strike - the same people who when Mr. White came out of his house and asked from a distance what they were doing would not answer him.

It was only after many minutes of explaining that we meant the bird no harm, and describing how the capture would be attempted, that permission was finally granted. More than anything, I had the feeling that the mere fact that we asked permission was what decided the case in our favor. At

this point, Mr. White very kindly told us how and from where to approach the bird, and related some of his experiences with the bird - especially the bird's tameness.

Now came mixed emotion - the excitement of actually getting the opportunity, and the great skepticism on my part of this bird striking a trap placed so obviously in the open by a plainly visible person. Regardless, this is what we had come for, and it was worth a try. I placed the trap on the ground near a fence about 20-30 yards from the owl and wired it to a strand in the fence. The owl became quite excited looking. This puffed-out ball of grizzled bird, perched so seemingly unconcerned about 20 feet off the ground against a brilliant, clear blue sky, suddenly flattened his feathers, stood erect and looked in a very concerned, staring manner at the trap. I returned to the car about 60 yards away and we waited. Anxiously the Whites waited. The bird continued to look concerned, but did nothing. It appeared that perhaps the trap was too close to the fence thereby making the owl hesitant about striking. The starlings were scrambling for all they were worth.

At Mr. White's suggestion, I re-entered the pasture and placed the trap about 15-20 feet from the foot of the perch. The owl looked remarkably flustered once again. On previous occasions I had stood very closely beneath him, and he had shown a great lack of concern in his brilliant yellow eyes. However, those two starlings made all the difference in the world. That owl's staring, intent yellow eyes were a sight to behold. They were wild with excitement. They were even as impressive as the glaring, fiery red eyes of a goshawk that had attacked me last June when Walt and I invaded its nesting privacy in an attempt to band it.

Once again we waited in the car. It almost looked hopeless. Then Walt yelled, "There he goes." Still vividly imprinted on my mind is the impression of that owl, with set wings, dropping sharply out of that tree, swooping up and pouncing on that trap. The owl perched and then fought the trap perhaps 10-15 seconds. It looked like the bird might be secure, so I dashed out of the car, but my exuberance was short-lived. When I was two or three steps from the car, the owl came free and flew up to a branch about six feet off the ground. This was as disappointing as the swoop at the trap had been exciting. Back in the car I figured that all was really lost. Then came another, but more direct attack once again delivered on set wings. It was a harder blow, because the trap rocked considerably. The owl fought the trap as though he were caught and could not maintain his equilibrium. However, after our first experience, we waited. In seconds, the owl flopped off the trap and flip-flopped on the snow. Surely he was caught. Out of the car I came, ran down the drive to the back of the house, across the yard and cleared the barbed wire fence in stride, all the while watching the seemingly precariously held owl. The closer I came, the more clearly evident became the possibility of escape. The bird was held by a single noose. Under

such cold weather conditions, nylon tends to lack suppleness, and judging from the flopping of the owl, the noose could have come free any second. Finally I was there, and with visions of how a gallinule had flopped out of a one and one-half inch mesh net last August and how I had dived into the muck and cattails after it, I securely grabbed the hawk owl with both leather-gloved hands. The prize was mine, and on his heavily feathered tarsi was no band. It would have been horribly disappointing if the bird had been previously banded.

Walt put 717-97721 on the same leg that had been held by the noose, as I held the bird. The Whites were thrilled at the sight of the bird in the hand. I was wonderfully satisfied, because I felt that a bigger victory had been won. In the fading light of dusk, the four of us went out to release the owl. To our backs came the golden glow of the sun now set beyond the Berkshires and ahead of us loomed the chill, grey New England landscape to the east. Into this darkness Walt released the owl and to our very great surprise, the bird flew about 15 feet to a maple along the drive and perched. There he remained for several minutes while I walked past him to the pasture to retrieve my starlings. When I passed by the owl and headed for the car, the owl finally flew. He behaved very typically as he swooped low from the maple out over the adjoining field, cleared the fence and again with set wings made a tremendous swoop up to the very same perch whence he had come.

Once again in the car, we headed west to the Berkshires and beyond.





The photographs were taken by Robert Yunick. He writes: "The pictures were taken with a Startech using Kodak Verichrome Pan film and M-2 bulbs. Most of the prints are made on Kodabromide F4 paper although some F2 & F5 was used. The bird was photographed in the White's house against a wood panel wall. The bird behaved exceedingly well and was most cooperative. It never even flinched. The hand is Walt Sabin's.

The owl did manage to bite him once during handling for banding. The bird's talons were remarkable. Once he grabbed my gloved hand and while I could feel the talons pricking through the deerskin, I slipped my hand out of the glove and the bird held the glove for a number of minutes before he let go in preference to strike at something else. We treated him with great respect.

The bird's tarsi were so heavily feathered (furry looking is more descriptive) that he required a 7A band despite the Banding Manual's recommendation of a 5A. I have no doubt banded my life's supply of Surnia ulula, but certainly it is a memory that will last a lifetime.

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