



Portrait of immature Goshawk
(Photo by Stuart D. Henderson)

1968 — A HAWKMAN'S YEAR
By John B. Holt, Jr.

New Year's Eve of '67 found me hard at work, putting the final touches on a new Bal-chatri trap - one with an extra door in one corner to facilitate the removal of "problem" mice! The Kestrel trapping season was by this time firmly established in southwestern Ohio. Indeed, since early December some 34 had been taken in our regular weekend forays into the farm country surrounding Cincinnati; and this number would be increased to 112 by March 16 - when I reluctantly hung up my traps to concentrate on the Great Horned Owl nesting season, already in full swing.

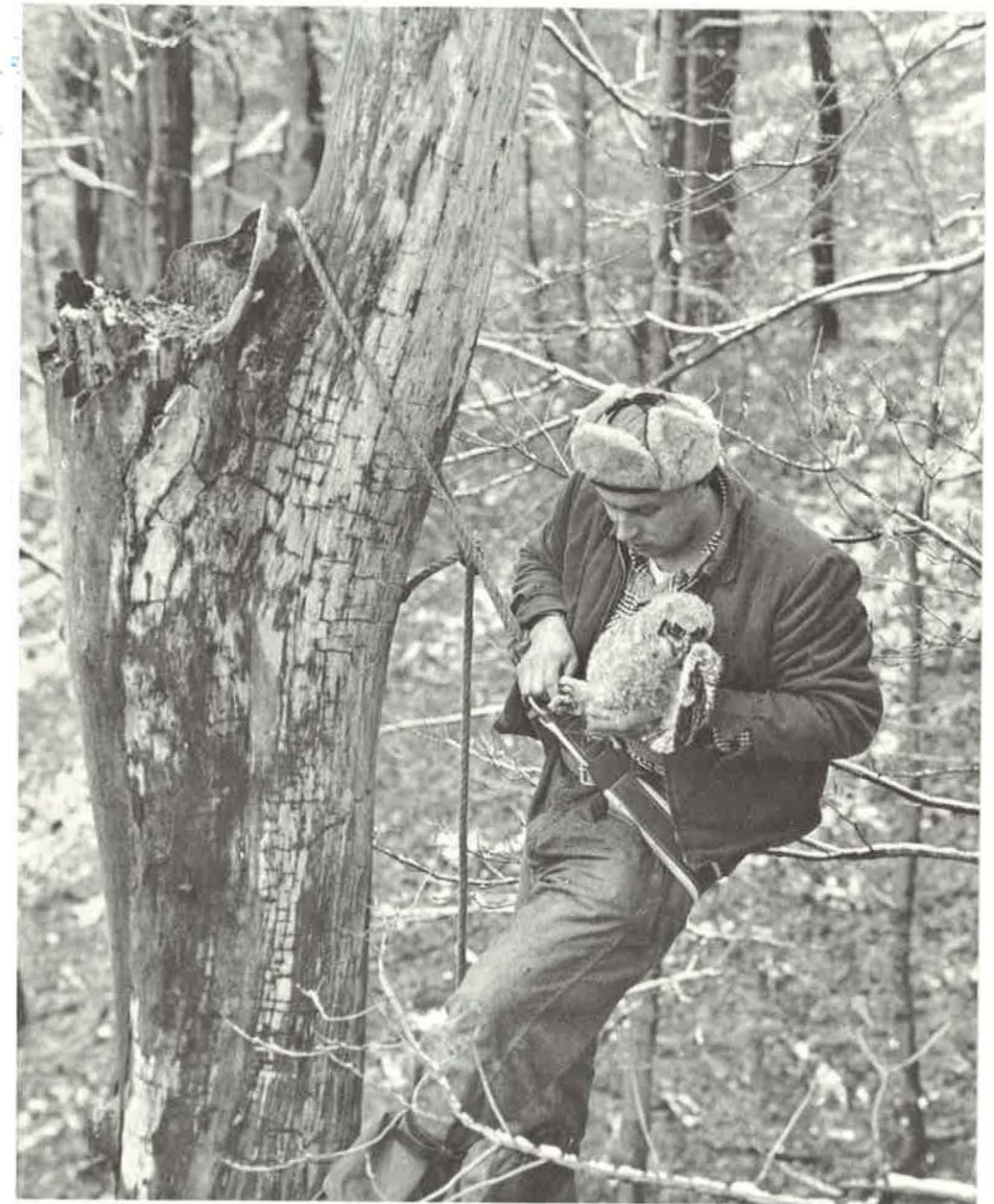
One of the more interesting entries in the Kestrel trapping notebook came in the "returns" column: along a two-mile stretch of road near Mixerville, Indiana I happened to trap two males within three weeks of each other, which I had previously banded as nestmates near Harrison, Ohio on June 21, 1965. It is significant that both of these birds were with females, now apparently part of the resident population on that area. My inherent romanticism leads me to wonder if perhaps they had "double-dated" sister females from another nest, but this is pure speculation!

On February 2 the 1968 nesting season officially got under way with the arduous task of checking out the 100 or so pairs of Great Horned Owls I had been watching for varying lengths of time in roughly a 2500 square mile area around greater Cincinnati, entailing a good month-and-a-half of intensive field work throughout February and part of March. By mid-March most of my old "regulars" had been visited, and 54 were found to be nesting, the remainder being inactive or otherwise "unlocatable" for a variety of reasons.

I seldom launch an all-out Horned Owl banding offensive until right after the vernal equinox: this assures a minimum of return trips to youngsters still to small to band - a hazard generally characteristic of the first week or so of my operation. This year, however, a spot check on March 15 revealed an early trend, many nests having sizable young already. I immediately "pushed the panic button" and started making the rounds - a good week earlier than usual, and wishing I had done so even sooner. A frantic three weeks of banding followed, as I vainly tried to catch up with the season. Then, too, the owls themselves did little to help the situation. For some unknown reason they (the adults) were especially belligerent this year, making an already difficult operation even more so, and necessitating the addition of a borrowed motorcycle helmet as a standard item of equipment - while previously, it had only been used for certain "elite" pairs known to be hostile.

Notwithstanding the aggressiveness of the adults, I managed to struggle through the bulk of the banding virtually unscathed; as a matter of fact I became so complacent toward the end of the season that I foolishly tried to take care of a late nest without the helmet (which had been dropped from the regalia after Redtail coverage began in April). Mama owl, of course, took full advantage of the situation, scoring no less than six direct hits on various parts of my unprotected anatomy before I could get to the nest and tag the well-grown youngsters - all the while trying to beat off the avenging adult. By the time I again reached the relative safety of the ground (where I could at least "hit the deck" when she came at me!) I was bleeding rather profusely from numerous cuts and punctures; but mostly I was concerned for my right ear, which the old bird had nearly shredded on one of her passes. Unable to ascertain the full extent of damage, I was beginning to picture myself as the "Vincent Van Gogh of the hawk banding world"...but surprisingly enough the wounds, though painful, healed up nicely; so well, in fact, that now I have scarcely anything in the way of scars to show for my ordeal (though I do try with what little I have!).

Oddly enough, I suddenly became quite anxious to close out the Horned Owl banding for another year. As luck would have it, though, more late-comers were still in the offing, with several new nests being added to the docket during Redtail field work well into April. Finally on the 18th I thankfully said farewell to the last of them, having banded a record number of 81 youngsters out of 51 successful nests.



The author banding a young Great Horned Owl at the nest.
(Photo by the author)

Despite the reluctance of the Horned Owl season to give up the ghost, April was predominantly a Red-tailed Hawk month; a last chance before the foliage to locate those nests not already recorded during Horned Owl banding which, by the way, usually runs concurrently with the hawks' incubation period. In addition to the 150 or so pairs of Redtails, I also had some 40 or 50 Red-shouldered Hawk areas to cover, and a few Barred and Screech Owls to check out before the big push of Redtail banding in May. It was a busy month, but nothing to compare with the hectic climax about to unfold.

In May my banding activity always reaches its zenith: not only the Redtails, which comprise the bulk of our nesting population, but Red-shoulders, Screech, Barred and Barn Owls, and even Kestrels (for which I have some 30 to 40 nesting sites to check out) come due in this month. In an effort to get all this accomplished, virtually every minute of spare time I can beg, borrow or steal from the Park is utilized to the fullest; I even adopt the habit of eating little or nothing after breakfast until nightfall. Despite this, it always seems as if there just aren't enough days in the month!

In a normal year it is almost axiomatic that all nestling Redtails are bandable after the first week of May; and I can usually "jump the gun" a bit on various early pairs I have come to know, often starting during the last week of April. This year, however, the hawks seemed bent on a late season, some young only hatching in the final days of the month. This unduly prolonged the nestling season, which I was hoping to be done with locally as soon as possible, in order to have time for some eagle banding up north, yet forthcoming.

Against what at first seemed to be insurmountable odds, I did manage to take care of all but a few Redtails and Redshoulders in about three weeks of intensive banding, and the rest could easily be postponed until after the first eagle trip. The final week of the month I had set aside for Kestrels, and for typing up whatever loose ends still remained in the Cincinnati area. The tally by the 2nd of June, then, looked something like this: Red-tailed Hawk, 141; Red-shouldered Hawk, 20; Kestrel, 86; Screech Owl, 12; Barred Owl, 6; and Barn Owl, 2.

At one time the month of June meant a gradual deescalation from the rigors of the nesting season - which by that time is waning in my local area. In recent years, though, this month has taken on a completely new character and might now be classified as sort of an esthetic frosting on the nesting season cake. This all came about early in 1967 when I first made the delightful acquaintance of the "eagle man of Michigan", an easy-going, 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ -foot 235-lb. giant with the unlikely name of Sergej Postupalsky, who had been doing the Michigan Bald Eagle survey for the National Audubon Society for a number of years. A non-climber himself (for obvious reasons) Sergej was more than agreeable to the suggestion that we should join forces in an effort to band some of his eaglets, most of which had heretofore

been leaving their aeries with unadorned tarsi!

This year we ran into some difficulty scheduling our Lower Michigan trip but finally did get together for a short one on June 9-11; this is at least a week beyond what is generally considered the optimum time for banding in that area, as some of the young are almost ready to fly by then. The Lower Peninsula is seldom a very productive area; moreover, our time for covering it is usually quite limited. Sergej had flown over it early in the season to determine which pairs were nesting, but he had not done a follow-up flight to see which of the active nests had indeed produced young. As a consequence, we were at a disadvantage from the outset, and could do little more than check out the most accessible pairs, especially those having relatively good past performance records. By trip's end we had banded only seven eaglets (and six more Redtails from nests Sergej had previously spotted along the way). A follow-up flight about a week later, however, revealed that we had gotten about half of the eaglets produced in the Lower Peninsula. It also showed that one well-grown youngster which had taken off as I ascended the nest tree (it was a strong enough flyer to elude our best attempts at recapture) had in fact returned to the aerie completely upon its own volition - though without the aluminum bracelet its brother had mysteriously acquired in the meantime!

The Upper Peninsula trip can best be described as very wet, very windy, and beset by numerous breakdowns and mishaps. Despite the horrendous weather, a cantankerous outboard engine, and other handicaps, we managed to rack up an additional 23 eaglets - mostly because the Upper Peninsula has a much denser eagle population than the Lower, and perhaps even more significantly, the Bald Eagle seems yet to be reproducing normally in much of that area.

It seems almost blasphemous to mention "buzzards" in virtually the same breath as eagles, but in the chronological order of things, they were the next items on the agenda. As a breeding bird the Turkey Vulture is probably about as common in central Ohio as it is anywhere else in the country. The young, moreover, are generally nestbound well into the summer months, often still incapable of sustained flight as late as the first of August - thus making them an ideal "off-season" project for the idle raptor bander.

This year's annual pilgrimage into the hills along the Hocking River south of Lancaster, Ohio was undertaken on July 24 with two field companions, Gary Denzler and Tom Fisher - an odd pair, who like myself, have soft spots in their hearts (and some might also contend, in our heads!) for these grotesque avifauna with uncouth habits when approached by the would-be bander. In keeping with the trend of the season, however, the weather proved to be abominable, with temperatures in the 90's and intermittent showers through the two-day field trip. Literally banding in the rain most of the time, we still managed to locate seven nests and band a total of 12



Top left: immature Goshawk; right: young Bald Eagle. Below: the author with a young Redtail. (Photos by Stuart D. Henderson.)

youngsters (ten Turkey Vultures and two Blacks) - missing two more Blacks from an early nest which were a bit too old to be "run down" and captured. All in all, it was one of the most successful ventures we had ever made into "buzzard country" despite the weather.

As far as the hawk-bander is concerned, August is the least productive month (to say the most!) and the first half of September isn't much better. For me this period has always been one of preparation for the coming fall migration, i.e. building traps, weaving nets, renovating equipment, etc. It is also a time for making sure my old jeep is in A-1 condition - nothing is quite so aggravating as motor vehicle failure when the fall flights are in progress and there is much traveling to be done.

On Sept. 20 Tom Fisher and I headed up to Wheatley, Ontario, mainly for the purpose of readying my trapping station near that lakeshore community for the Sharp-shinned Hawk flights which were anticipated by the following weekend. To our surprise, however, we found the hawks already in lively passage, making for a typical "panic play" situation until we cleared out a small area and got something of a "skeleton set-up" into operation. We did manage to snag two birds on the 20th, 21 birds on the 21st, and 12 on the 22nd - mostly amid the confusion of cutting grass, sinking poles, stringing lines, rebuilding the blind, and then making alterations as they became necessary.

Unfortunately I had certain perfunctory obligations as a Park Ranger to fulfill on Sept. 23-25; and likely missed a good Sharpshin movement during that period. I was back to Wheatley late on the 26th, though, and this time for a ten-day sojourn, which added 114 more "Sharpies" to the list, along with four Cooper's and two Red-tailed Hawks.

The grand finale of the fall migration, however, was still in the offing as I refocused my attention from the Canadian lake shore to the mountains of Pennsylvania - where I have been something of a "regular" for the past ten years or so. Even before my advance trip on Oct. 18-20, word had reached me from a fellow ridge-trapped (Chester J. Robertson, who operates a full time station just east of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, and caught over 400 hawks there last fall) that it was definitely a Goshawk year on the mountain; so all indications were for a lively season ahead - even if the Redtails didn't cooperate!

I caught nothing on the preliminary trip - foul weather again - but did get my two trapping stations (one for south winds, the other for north) and camp site set up and ready to go. On Oct. 24 I returned for the main stay, consisting of two weeks and some odd days - having already missed the first big push of Redtails and Goshawks on the 21st and 22nd. It took a while for another half-decent flight to develop, but things really got into high gear in the four-day period from Oct. 29 through Nov. 1; the 31st being about my best day with 11 Redtails and nine Goshawks.

The second week of my Pennsylvania visit was something of a failure, being spent sitting around in the rain most of the time, waiting for the weather to break. I did manage to catch my one and only Golden Eagle between raindrops, but few Redtails or Goshawks were added during this slack period. While I had already caught enough birds prior to Nov. 2 at least to keep the trip out of the fiasco category, the loss of the best part of the final week stung me to the quick - of the totals banded: 60 Redtails, 21 Goshawks, 4 Redshoulders, 1 Cooper's and 1 Golden Eagle, only 11 Redtails, 4 Goshawks, one Redshoulder and the Eagle were taken after the 2nd.

I was consoled by the fact that on one memorable day (Nov. 6) I finally succeeded in landing my first Golden Eagle - inasmuch as this bird had managed to avoid such contact with me in all my years of trapping on the Mountain. For some reason the eagles were especially responsive last fall: "Robby" caught three (Goldens) and had several "close calls"; I had three others plow through my station like freight trains, rendering the set-up a first-class disaster area in the process, and ending up bandless to boot. I was getting reluctant even to try for the monsters after a while, as it took so long to get back into business when one paid me a visit!

It was pretty evident by Nov. 9 that the hawk flights in Penna. were far from over - despite the fact that my vacation time most definitely was. I should have called it quits right then and there, but I decided to give it one more try on the following weekend. Thus I ventured back to Penna. on the 14th for a last ditch effort. In my absence about a foot of snow had fallen on the ridge, but it was rapidly melting away on my return. On the morning of the 15th I bucked my way through the remnants of the snow up to my south station near Palmerton. Actually, the skies did clear shortly after I arrived and got set up, and several hawks did see fit to move in the course of the afternoon: response, however, was something else again, with just one Cooper's Hawk gracing the bow-trap before the flight (such as it was) ended. The following day the promised rains came, forcibly ringing down the curtain on another year of ridge trapping.

And so the trapping season ended less than triumphantly, but considering the success I had experienced, overall, I really had few grounds for complaint. At any rate, there was little time to brood over the negative side; even as the Appalachian foothills were still plainly visible in my rear-view mirror, my thoughts were completely absorbed in a project I had been contemplating for the months ahead - building "bogus" Redtail nests in Great Horned Owl territories lacking nests sites - which would be taking up most of my "off" time until the '69 nesting season rolled around...when the cycle would be starting all over again!

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