

TRYING TO TAME A GREAT HORNED OWL.¹

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Plate IX.

THE Great Horned Owl, according to Dr. A. K. Fisher, is in disposition fierce and untamable; in strength and courage inferior to none of our rapacious birds. It is so savage and seemingly so devoid of the confidence usually shown by birds of prey kept in confinement, that it is with the greatest difficulty that it can be tamed even when taken young from the nest. It is morose and sullen, lacks affection for its keepers and often will fly viciously at anyone who attempts to handle it or enter the apartment in which it is confined. Dr. Fisher qualifies this statement by a "notable exception." Two Owls belonging to Dr. Coues were kind and gentle and showed no impatience when handled.

Last spring when two boys from near Harris, Arkansas, came into my office with a young Great Horned Owl and offered to sell it for a dollar and twenty-five cents, I took this opportunity to learn whether or not this Owl can be tamed. This was on April 9, and the Owl was probably about six weeks old (assuming that the eggs are laid late in January or early in February and hatch in four weeks). It was completely in nesting plumage and about seven inches tall when standing erect.

It seemed to have very little fear of me or anyone else, submitting readily to petting, carrying about, etc. Once in a while it would attempt to bite, but being rather slow at it, this seemed more like play. In a day or two I learned that although the Owl would not remain content in an empty box, it was well satisfied with the corner of the window ledge near my desk. This in spite of the fact that in general the chief requirement for a resting place in a room is the highest object in that room. Apparently the window ledge was so satisfactory because it offered a good view over the road near-by, where various vehicles passed frequently. From here is also a good view of the athletic field and the various sport activities claimed much of the Owl's attention. Finally the numerous Sparrows, aided by a few Robins, Brown Thrashers, Blue-

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birds, and Warblers, that would from time to time gather on the near-by light wires, would bring pleasant variation in the day's amusement. On this window ledge the Owl would sit very contentedly for a good while, often for four or five hours. Although I would frequently leave the office and sometimes be out for an hour or longer, it would almost always remain at its place. However, if at any time there passed a lumber wagon, more noisy than the average, the Owl would promptly take flight and land on top of a bookcase reaching nearly to the ceiling. A few days after the Owl was secured, it was taken before a class in Nature Study, about 50 students, placed on a box standing on the desk, and it remained there in good order during the hour while the class was in session. Observing the numerous faces in the room apparently provided very good entertainment. For quarters, we secured a cage, about three feet high, three feet long, and twenty inches wide, made of one-inch mesh chicken-wire. A stick hung in the meshes of the wire provided a perch that seemed quite suitable.

It is said that the young Great Horned Owls grow rather slowly. This, if I may judge from my limited observation, is due to the light appetite of the young birds. It was a matter of considerable surprise to find that the young Owl would eat only a small meal of raw meat, about three ounces, once a day for three or five days and then refuse food for a day. In order to keep it in the best of health and provide for normal development, food was offered every day except Sunday (when fresh meat was not available). When it was about full grown it was fed every other day, and it would accept the food promptly and regularly.

For food, any kind of raw meat was acceptable, heads of Chickens were a delicacy. Cooked meat was accepted but once, and then apparently by mistake. The feeding habits are of unusual interest because they show more of the Owl's temperament than other activities. If a piece of meat at feeding time is held near enough so it can seize it with its bill, the Owl will do so; if it is held but a few inches farther away the Owl will not take it. If the head of a Chicken or a rat that has been killed in a trap is given, the Owl takes on a very wild attitude. When one approaches the cage after it has begun feeding, it ruffles its feathers and snaps its bill very noisily.

It is said that in zoological parks Owls are fed on live Chickens or birds from time to time to provide an opportunity for the special function of the crop, and that Owls fed on raw meat alone apparently cannot maintain a state of good health. By putting the meat ration on the excelsior covering the floor of the cage, the Owl takes in with the meat an appreciable quantity of the excelsior, and this, as I have repeatedly observed, is thrown out in pellets. Since the Owl's diet was varied somewhat with Chicken heads, now and then a bird or a rat, it cannot be said that raw meat alone is satisfactory; but there are good indications that this is true.

In securing a victim such as a rat, the Owl shows most vividly its cruel nature. Holding the rat by its powerful talons it gradually drives the claws deeper into the struggling victim. If the rat attempts to bite, the Owl retaliates with some vicious pecking. It may require five to ten minutes before the rat ceases to struggle, and the Owl regards all this with utter indifference.

According to accounts given by persons who have observed the Owl robbing a Chicken house, it will on entering the house take up a position on a perch near the intended victim. For a while it will sit still, then gradually proceed to push the Chicken off the perch. When the Chicken begins to flutter and fall, the owl quickly seizes it with its talons. In an attempt to verify this, I placed the Owl and a young Chicken (weighing about 3 pounds, which is also the weight of the Owl) in a screen house. At first the Owl was rather afraid of the Chicken; soon, however, it realized that there was nothing to fear. The two were left together all the afternoon, and apparently got along very well.

Referring now to the general behavior of the Owl, it must be said that it has a degree of tamability. At no time has it tried to run away from me. At all times have I handled it without gloves, and if this is done carefully and observant of certain precautions, the Owl will not even struggle to get out of my grasp. It will allow all manner of petting, although at times it may, in a playful way, peck at one's hand so as to draw blood. It has shown no evidence of being fierce or savage. It will attack when it feels driven to do so in self defense. Thus on one occasion, when I handled it in a very awkward manner, it struck my left hand with its talons in such a way that I wore a bandage for several days.

The Owl is easily frightened. If it can get away, it will do so; if not, it will act in self defense. When provided with some food such as a head of a Chicken, the Owl is very easily excited, apparently fearing the loss of the choice morsel. Its conduct in the presence of strangers is very conclusive evidence that it knows its keeper. It has some confidence in the keeper, for it is entirely quiet when I am near the cage; whereas a stranger will cause it to make a desperate effort to escape from its confinement.

On numerous occasions, such as petting or when I apply a nail file to its upper mandible, or to the claws, the Owl utters a plaintive cry, sounding somewhat like: "killi killi." The characteristic hooting I have, until recently, but seldom heard. Lately I have, by imitating its call and agitating it gently (turning its perch, etc.), prompted it to hoot many times, although in a rather subdued tone. This, I think, is the nearest approach it has made to playfulness.

As a pet it rather resembles a parrot and has very little of the playful nature usually required of pets. Its handling is not very unlike that of bees. Though bees are not domesticated, they can be handled if the beekeeper understands bee behavior. The Owl's tamability goes further, however; it knows its keeper and usually accepts whatever he wishes to do with a good deal of tolerance.

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