

Scraps from an Owl Table

BY VERNON BAILEY

A pair of great horned owls raised their young in a niche near the top of a cliff, at the western base of the Davis Mountains, Texas, in the summer of 1902, but when I found the nest on August 12 it was empty. I learned at the ranch just around the corner of the cliff that one of the old owls had been killed a short time before my arrival and that several loads of shot had been fired at other members of the family for fear they might catch the chickens. There were at least two of the young owls which were full grown and strong fliers, for I often scared them out of the dark niches or little caves in the neighboring cliffs during the day, but they evidently lacked experience in catching their own meat, for their nightly screams from cliff and fence post had a hungry insistence. It would have kept one old bird hustling to feed the family, even in this open, half desert country of abundant small game had the youngsters done no hunting for themselves, but they were trying to make an honest living, judging by their prolonged screams from the fence posts down by the alfalfa patch.

But for the point of my story I must return to the nest, or to the ground at the base of the cliff forty feet below the old nest cave. There were a few pellets, a quantity of disintegrated pellet material, and nearly a bushel, at a rough estimate, of small bones scattered over the ground. Much of the material had been washed down the steep slope and mixed with the stones and earth and lost, but enough remained to show what had been the principal food of the family during the spring and early summer.

For an hour I dug in this debris, picking out parts of bones that I could recognize or that could be identified later, and making a rough census of the contents of the mass. Identifications and estimates of numbers were based mainly on skulls or parts of skulls with teeth, and in most cases were not difficult. The most abundant bones were those of the cottontail (*Lepus a. minor*) of which I recognized parts of fully 100 skulls. A few jack rabbit jaws and teeth were found, but mostly those of young or half grown animals. Skulls or parts of skulls of about twenty pocket gophers (*Cratogeomys castanops*) were found. Two species of wood rats (*Neotoma micropus* and *albigula*) and the large kangaroo rat (*Dipodomys spectabilis*) were well represented by broken skulls. There were a few pocket mice (*Perognathus*), including two species. White-footed and grasshopper mice (*Peromyscus* and *Onychomys*) skulls were common, and I found jaws of two little spotted skunks (*Spilogale*) and skulls of two bats. Bones of horned toads and snakes were common and the legs and shells of beetles, grasshoppers, and various insects were abundant in the mass. I found one sternum of a bird the size of a meadowlark and one lower mandible that was probably from a chicken.

The ranch was typical of the west Texas cattle country, stretching down from the base of the mountains over beautiful grassy slopes to the next ranch six miles below. There was not even a garden, but a small peach orchard loaded with fine fruit surrounded the windmill pond, and about three acres of alfalfa just below the pond yielded one or two crops a year. The pocket gophers were common in both peach orchard and alfalfa patch but I could find none on the drier upland. But for the owls it is doubtful if either peach trees or alfalfa would ever have yielded a crop, while mice, rats, and rabbits would have been present in troublesome abundance.

The ranchman admitted that only one or two chickens had disappeared during the summer, but even then he could not get over the idea that owls lived on chickens and were his enemies.

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