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NOCTURNAL OBSERVATIONS OF ELF OWLS

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From June 8 to 11, 1943, some rather detailed observations of Elf Owls (*Micropallas whitneyi*) were made in the Kofa Mountain Game Refuge, Yuma County, Arizona. A nest hole containing three young, situated about fourteen feet from the ground in a saguaro, was selected for photographic purposes. The cavity was one excavated earlier by a Gilded Flicker. A platform was built approximately five feet below the nest opening, and a six-volt bulb worked from a storage battery was kept burning continuously during the night within five feet of the nest. Within a few hours the pair of birds became accustomed to this illumination and before long even landed on the reflector to catch insects drawn to the light.

In the course of my observations, which amounted to about five hours each night, I failed to see the owls bring to the nest anything but insects, spiders and scorpions. The capture of some of this prey revealed what was, to me, something different in the way of owl behavior. On several occasions one of the birds was seen to fly up into the air and pursue an insect in flight after the manner of a phoebe. This type of hunting was remarkably successful. Both birds also were noticed flying to a near-by century plant bloom. It was too far away for a flashlight to pick up details satisfactorily, so the flower stalk was cut off and brought close to the nest. Here, under artificial illumination, my suspicion of an oriole-type of food-catching was confirmed. Both parents were seen to fly to this plant, hang upside down from a blossom and pick up the night-flying insects that were attracted to the bloom. These gorgeous flowers were common in the region and no doubt the birds flew from one to another taking their pick, cafeteria style.

The Elf Owl's diet, which does not seem to include warm-blooded animals, perhaps has some bearing on the noisy flight of this species. Every other owl which I have observed is practically noiseless in flight. These desert Elf Owls, however, advertised their approach to the nest with swishing wings, and even in total darkness it was easy to tell when one passed a score of feet away.

Another of their flight tactics was somewhat un-owl-like, namely their ability to hover. On three or four occasions one of the birds was standing in the nest doorway when its mate returned with food. The incoming bird would then wait with whirring wings and motionless body until the entrance was clear. From my previous experience with other birds of prey, it seems that most of the insect eaters have this hovering ability to a limited extent. The chief exponents of this type of flight are the Sparrow Hawk, Elf Owl and Burrowing Owl. Their proficiency would seem to rank in the order named.

Some observers have claimed that Elf Owls are at times gregarious. This was very obvious in the Kofa Mountains. During the night following the day on which the blind was constructed, there were four Elf Owls that "cussed out" the human interference.

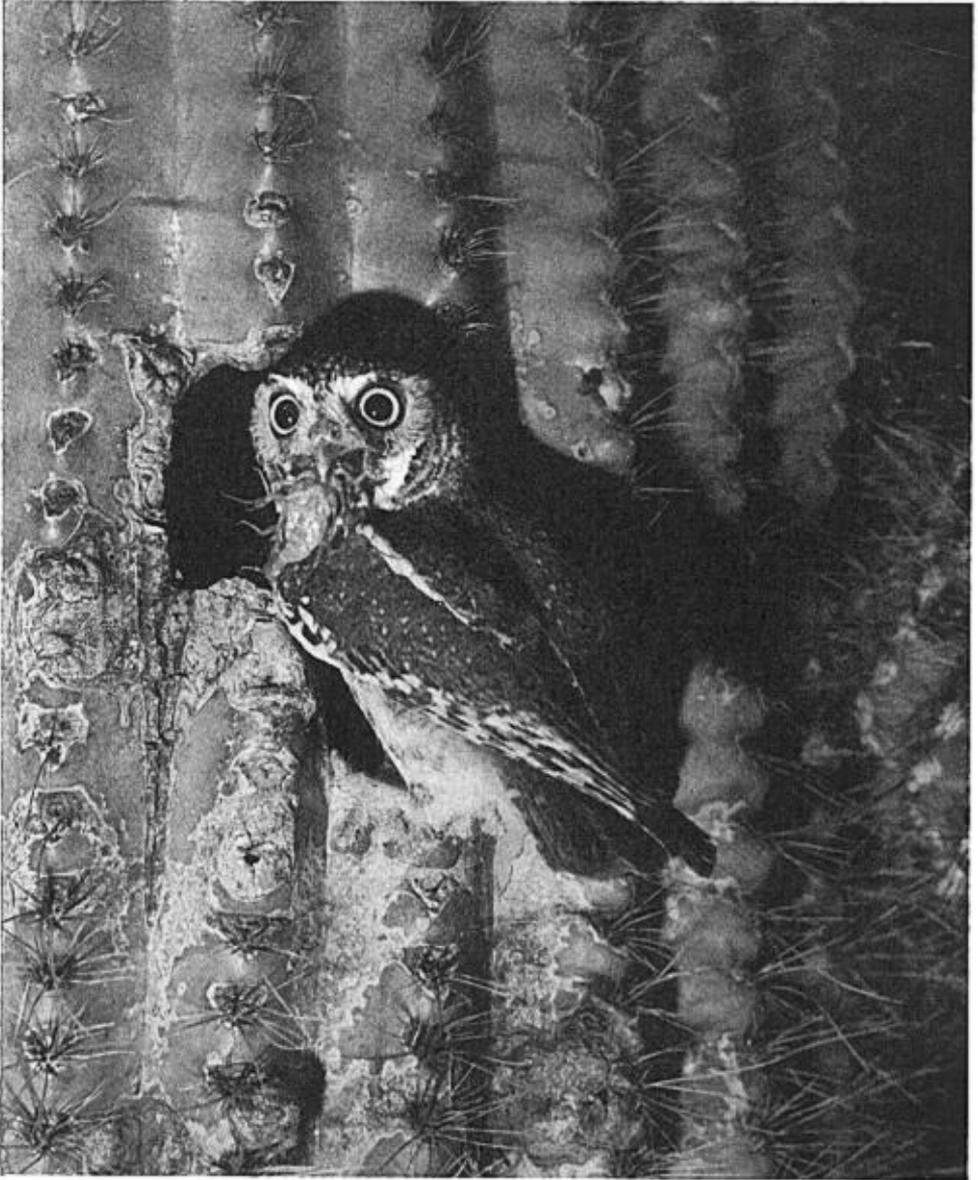


Fig. 44. Elf Owl with scorpion at entrance to nest in saguaro.

The invasion of a nesting domain by Elf Owls other than the pair that controlled it seemed to pass unnoticed; in fact the presence of the visitors seemed almost welcome. Screech Owls under similar conditions would have had a battle royal. During one of the nights a coyote came down a mountain sheep trail that ran almost under the nest. While this intruder was still several hundred yards away he was convoyed by at least four owls. The pair I was working with took up the escort until he was well into the

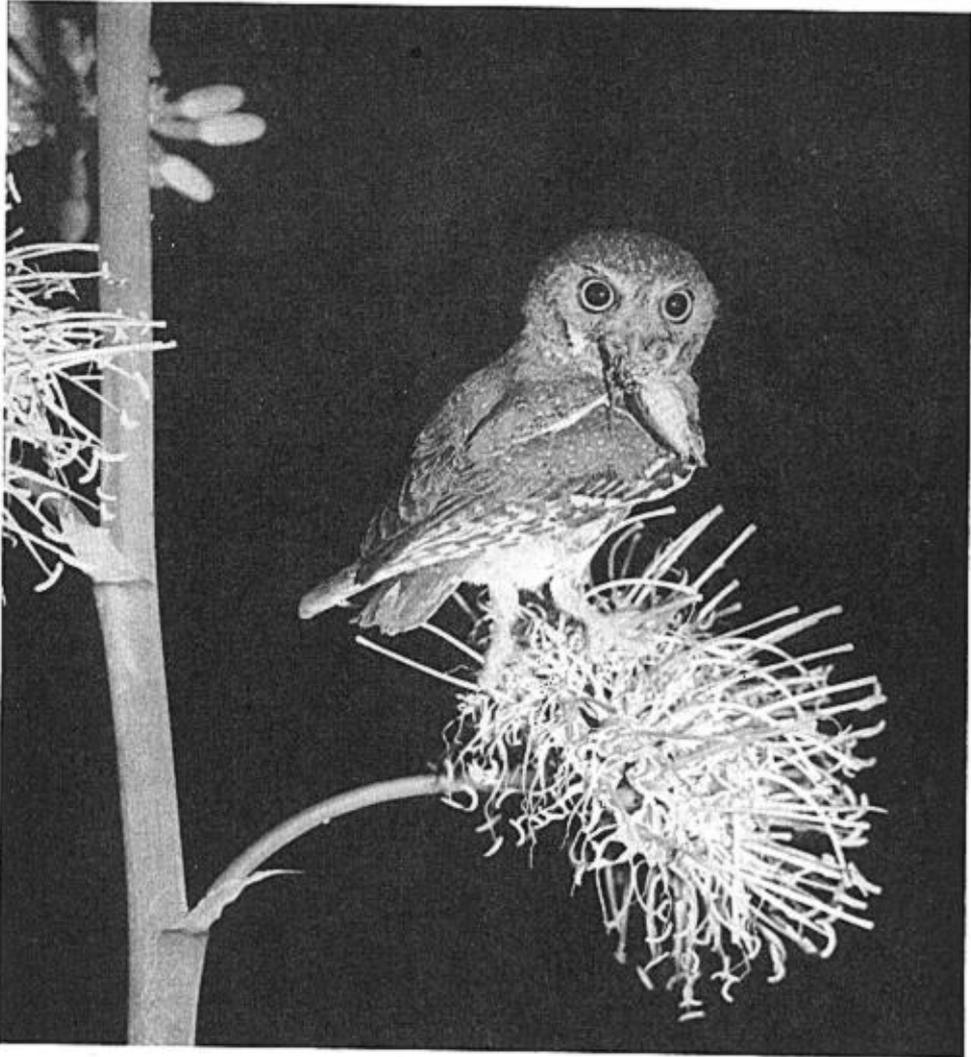


Fig. 45. Elf Owl on century plant blossom.

territory of another pair. This convoying seemed to be limited to predatory mammals. The close passage of a deer or a burro on the same night did not arouse any calls of protest.

Natural History Museum, San Diego, California, July 15, 1943.