

## NOTES ON OWLS FOR OTHER AMATEURS

by  
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We are solely interested in breeding captive birds for the purpose of returning the young to the wild; thus our experiments in this direction have been purely as a means toward an end. Our main interest is owls, and our first attempt was with a Tawny Owl.

We took our first injured bird in 1954, and tried our first breeding experiments five years later. In our ignorance we thought all that was needed was to introduce male to female. We made a most complicated series of traps on the aviary roof, so that visiting owls could literally drop in during the night. We were left with some ridiculous situations, such as fifteen owls inside—none of which seemed particularly keen to regain its freedom in the early dawn of the next day. One's charitable instincts become somewhat dulled when one has crept out in pyjamas to release the birds, only to find them reluctant to go, and one's own tame bird taking refuge from her would-be mates inside one's jacket.

Now, of course, we know that birds need some time to settle down and become familiar with their surroundings before they will attempt to breed. This is particularly true of birds that have been reared in captivity. Occasionally wild ones that have been injured and brought in during the breeding season will settle immediately.

We were determined to breed the Tawny Owls, especially as we could find no one who had done it before. We spent hours and nights studying the wild owls, especially at breeding time. It was difficult to know how many of their actions preceding mating were an essential part of their breeding behaviour. At first we built the aviaries as large and as natural as possible. Now we know that they appear to be more content if they are confined; the amount of flight area available is immaterial.

We tried putting nest boxes in different positions, but we had no success with any until we put the boxes as high up as possible and facing east.

The female Tawny Owl laid and brooded for two years, but the cock showed little interest in her. We wondered how important a part the establishing of territorial boundaries played in their actual breeding cycle. We introduced a second cock into the aviary for several days, and three young owls were produced that year, 1962.

This is well worth trying, for even with our European Goshawks, the introduction of a second cock caused our own cock to mount the hen almost immediately, and their first egg was laid the following week.

We have found that birds which have been tame can be dangerous during breeding time. My own tame Tawny Owl knocked me unconscious last year, leaving me in a rather nasty situation, for only my small son was there at the time, and the owls would allow neither him nor the neighbours to rescue me. Previously, she had allowed me to feed her all the time she was on the nest, although she would tolerate no one else, and would even try to attack them through the wire.

Birds are most likely to desert the nest soon after they have started brooding or just before the young are big enough to fledge. Once the parents are sitting firmly there is little that will disturb them. Stray dogs, especially those that jump at the wire, will upset them. Without doubt, however, it is young children that upset nesting birds most. Three times, our Tawny Owls have deserted their nests following a visit by people who brought young children. I have a theory that it is the high pitched voices of the children which upsets the birds.

Surely we cannot be the only people who find that strangers think ours must be a fine place to visit, particularly on weekends. We have come home and found perfect strangers walking round our back garden. How does one explain without giving offence?

As soon as our owls were preparing to breed, we brought in a supply of day-old chicks. These seemed ideal, as their balanced diet and antibiotics were sure to pass some of their immunity on to our birds. The young were hatched, but despite added vitamins and varied diets, some of the chicks suffered from deficiencies. This happened not once, but time and time again; there was apparently no rhyme nor reason to it. There would be two perfect and two imperfect chicks in the same brood. It has been heartbreaking; deficient sight, deafness, inability to stand or balance properly, rickets. At last we feel we are solving this problem. I can only touch on some of the things we have discovered, for the whole subject merits a page of its own.

All our problems have been traced back to deficiencies in the birds' diet. Besides adding vitamins, we had been adding chopped chicks, but it seems that this was not enough. The chicks were not rich enough in calcium to be of value to the owlets. The bones of birds are not as solid as those of rats or mice, and, of course, those of chicks are even less firm. It is important that the parent birds have a correctly balanced diet when egg laying is imminent, for deficiencies can be passed on to the young at this stage. Most of the veterinary preparations on the market are planned for dogs and cats rather than

for birds; they are not always adequate, especially during the period of rapid growth around the third week. It is also as important to add trace elements, such as manganese, as it is the more familiar vitamins.

It seems we have not yet gotten completely on top of this dietary problem, for although our Goshawks and Kestrels laid and brooded eggs this year, the eggs were pure white in colour with no trace of the colouring one would expect.

Although we had the first breeding success in 1962, we felt we could not claim any success until 1969 when the young that we had bred in captivity, themselves bred in the wild. It was not a hundred per cent successful, however, because we had the doubtful pleasure of having the Tawny Owl bring three young to our bedroom window every night for a month, refusing to move until I got myself up and put out chicks on the sill for her. What with the owls screeching and John burying his head beneath the bedclothes and moaning because we had not taken up droughts [checkers] as a hobby, these were not the most restful nights.

Our owl has bred again this year and two other pairs were on eggs. I have yet to hear if they brought off their young.

We do not like ringing [banding] our birds. All we want to know is if they are fending for themselves in the wild. Gentian violet beneath the tail is the best means of identification, and for us is superior to rings which are not so easy to see in flight. With dark birds, like Guillemots, I snip a bit out of their tails to give them a slightly forked appearance. Either method is satisfactory.

Besides the Tawny Owls, we have now gone full circle with Barn Owls. Three pairs have bred in the wild, one pair in an old hollow ash tree right outside our kitchen window. I do not think anyone can appreciate how we have felt. The hen has allowed us to sit on the fence by the tree, and on more than one occasion she has actually flown between us. Last week the young left the nest and flew. Somehow, as we watched them in the sallow Lincolnshire sunset, all the worries and disappointments of the past sixteen years seemed so very worthwhile.

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