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# Feathers in the soup!

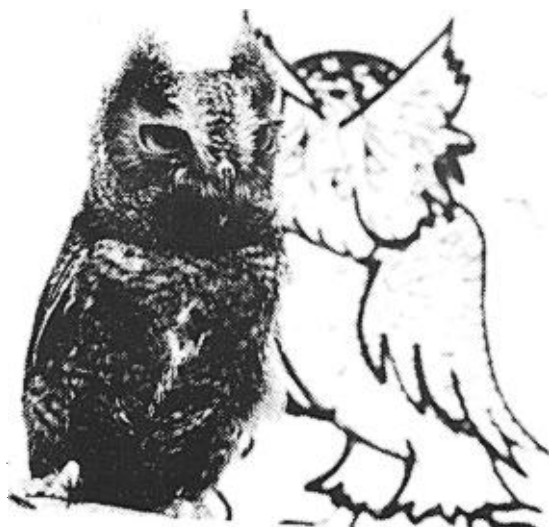
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One thing that bothers me about birds is their feathers. Well, I don't really mind them, but they do tend to get me into trouble. Take my love affair with the baby owls, for instance—now that created some problems.

It always starts with a phone call: "Hello. Is this the bird man?" and, before I can answer, "Do you help injured baby, cat-caught, dog-caught, chimney-trapped birds?" (Take your pick.) What they mean is will you please take it off their hands. "Well," I hesitate and, in this case, an excited voice on the other end continues, "Guess what—the wind blew down our old apple tree last night and two baby owls fell out—well, actually three, but one got away and my Mom put two in a trash can. You remember me—I'm Freddie from Outdoor School—remember? I helped you do some banding."

"Sure," I say, knowing him not, but giving him the answer he expects. "I'll come over. Where do you live?"

So that night I inherited two young gray-phase Screech Owls to feed and care for. Now two were bad enough, but the next day at my office another call came. "Mr. Hodgdon?" "Yes." "This is John Little. Would you like a baby owl?"



Since John Little is a member of the School Board (one of my bosses), what would you expect me to say? It seems that someone left an owl at his pet shop. (After all, he runs a pet shop so that's where it belongs!) "Sure," I said. So now I had a young brown-phase Screech Owl to feed and raise!

When my wife came home, I broached the subject very carefully and we finally arrived at a stand-off. O.K. for these three, but this is it. No more!

"Eeny," "Meeny," and "Mo" as they were named, grew fast, gobbling down cat food, hamburger, bird feathers and grit with a dash of cod liver oil thrown in. They were so fluffy and cute, and looked up at us with those big eyes. It wasn't long before we all fell in love with them—well anyway, I did. Soon all were out of their boxes and exploring the house, cat, dog, beds—you name it; they were into everything. Then they learned they had wings and that's when the feathers really flew.

In working with these young owls we had to be quick for many reasons: catching them in perilous places; catching them before they got into hard-to-reach places; cleaning up a mess before someone else saw it. But the quickest quick was while giving a young bird its food on a toothpick and it grabbed the food, toothpick and all, and started swallowing. It took a lightning fast move to rescue the toothpick. Several times we nearly lost the battle, but somehow we succeeded and the owls grew.

One of my more embarrassing moments occurred when I was going to an elementary school to do a program on birds. I decided to take one of the owls with me, so I picked up Meeny and put him/her into a bird cage and deposited the cage in the back of my car. In order to keep the bird quiet, I put a towel over the cage. As I arrived at the school, I carefully took the towel-covered cage out of the car and walked proudly into the auditorium. There, 300 eager sets of eyes focused on my cage.

After introductions and many questions concerning what I had in that cage, I announced proudly, "Boys and girls, I have brought a little baby Screech Owl to see you. We call the owl 'Meeny'."

I removed the towel, announcing loudly, "Here's Meeny." Gasps of astonishment came from all of us; the cage was empty. A quick inspection revealed that the bottom of the cage had fallen out. I dashed madly back to the parking lot where, luckily, the owl was sitting under my car wondering what was going on.

I picked the bird up carefully, dashed back to the auditorium, and was able to go on with the show. The classroom teachers often ask me if I can still run as fast as I did when I left the auditorium looking for the owl. Some fun!

As the owls grew, I'd take them outside while I gardened. They'd run around after me trying their wings and eating bugs and beetles as I found them. "Daddy" owl could never find them fast enough!

But then one day, with company coming, my good wife decided to make her famous New England beef soup. At that particular time "Mo" decided to try a long distance solo flight. Normally, the owls would fly to me or from my hand. But this time Mo took off from the floor, gained height and started beating his/her wings furiously. Spotting my wife, and knowing she would be a good landing place, Mo set his/her wings for the best possible landing.

Unfortunately, my wife moved and the owl kept going, hit the soup pot, hung desperately, beating his/her wings, lost some feathers and—finally succeeding—posed teetering, over the soup, clicking his/her bill as if to say, "Hey folks, I made it!"

Naturally, the feathers had dropped in the soup. Well, the end of this sad story is that although I was concerned about the owl being so close to the fire and hot soup, my wife saw only the feathers in the soup. Guess who had to eat it all—I mean every drop of that soup! And we all dined out at my expense!

I'm back in my wife's good graces now, and Eeny, Meeny, and Mo are flying around in the woods where I released them at the Outdoor School. I hope they have learned their lessons well and are having fun eating mice and beetles. I know that I learned I can't cough up a pellet of feathers like they do; I just had to strain the feathers out of an otherwise delicious soup. ♦

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Art work by Mr. Harry E. Mandell, Supervisor of Art, Board of Education, Allegany County, Cumberland, MD 21502

