

March 2009: Meditations on Great Horned Owls

Last year I became an Internet voyeur. But don't worry, it's not what you might think. A friend told me about an "owl cam"—a video camera linked to the Internet—set up in a building at the California State University Bakersfield campus. On a sheltered ledge a great horned owl has for several years made her nest and raised young on camera. I went to the site and got hooked.

Great horned owls are early breeders, even here in Maine in the throes of winter. As early as January the birds become more vocal as their hooting courtship commences. Females usually nest in February. The eggs take a month to hatch, so before spring has even officially arrived, most great horned owlets have emerged into the world. The California owl laid her eggs the first week of February, and they had all hatched by March 9.

Despite the fact that the owl family was 3,000 miles away, I (and probably hundreds of other people around the world) quickly came to think of them as "my owls." I sat at my computer each evening—grateful for the three-hour time difference—and watched the mother brooding. Every once in a while she'd re-settle herself and I'd catch a glimpse of, first, three eggs, and eventually, a wriggling heap of baby birds. She always faced the camera—really, she could not have chosen a more convenient place to nest for viewing purposes—calmly preening herself or the babies, but mostly just sitting there. You wouldn't think this could be interesting—my husband certainly didn't—but for me, it was a fascinating glimpse into an alien world.

When I first saw those white fuzz-balls peep out from under their mother's breast, I instantly became anxious for their future—and I'm not a naturally maternal person. I knew then that I was vesting myself with an emotional attachment that very well might end painfully. If something happened to them, I would just have to sit here and watch. But watch I did.

Baby owls are really rather ugly for the first few weeks, covered with white fuzz and lolling around in a spastic way. It was hard to imagine that one day these gangly creatures would look like their beautiful, cat-eared mother. Several times I watched her tear apart a pigeon carcass into small pieces, feathers flying, and feed the babies. The two older owlets were noticeably larger than the third one, and seemed to hog all the food. I knew as a fact of nature that the runt often didn't make it. Sometimes I would click to the website and the owl chicks would be strewn across the ledge amid the detritus of their many meals, and I would watch each lump until I could tell by body movements that it was breathing. Other times, one would be off-camera, out of sight, and I would worry until it popped back into view.



Great Horned Owlets. Photo by Kirk Gentalen.

By April they were still motley-looking, ragged pinfeathers showing through their down. They flopped all around the ledge and often right under the camera, heads looming large, yellow eyes bright. It was as if they knew people were watching and they wanted to act up a little. When their mother would fly in with food, the begging horde mob her. She would often perch on the ledge wall just out of their reach and look down on them with what I anthropomorphized as a look of exasperation. I imagined her thinking, "When will these big blobs of fuzz grow up and leave me in peace?" At dusk, she perched on the wall and looked toward the woods with what seemed to me like longing. Perhaps I was projecting. Remember, I don't have children.

The crowd of three began to dwarf her, puffed up with their mix of baby and adult feathers. By late April, they were flexing wings and itching to escape the confines of the ledge. Even the runt had a wingspan much wider than I'd expected. They'd hop up onto the wall, and I'd worry one would fall off and not be able to save itself by flying. They still seemed so uncoordinated, and hadn't yet grown in all their adult feathers or ear tufts.

One day in early May, I watched mama owl sit on the wall for a long time. Later, she was gone. When I checked again before going to bed, the three owlets were lined up on the wall looking toward the woods. About half an hour later, according to the friend who had first recommended the site, they were gone too. When I signed on the next day, leaf litter and pigeon remains stirred in the breeze, but my owls had all flown.

For several days I suffered from empty nest syndrome, literally. I missed being able to watch them. And I worried about them. I knew I would never see them again or know what happened to them. I had to assume that they'd done what

they were supposed to do, but the lack of closure was unnerving—after all, I'd watched them since they were eggs.

The story should end there, unresolved. But on a Massachusetts Audubon bird outing a few weeks later, we visited a great horned owl nesting site and spotted the mother owl and two of her recently fledged young nearby. The trip leader told us that the mother owl gets her young to fly by luring them with food. Once they leave the nest, she will continue to feed them for several weeks, and they will remain a family group through the summer. So through these proxy owls, I learned with no small relief what had probably happened with "my owls." When they were lined up on the wall that last night, they were undoubtedly watching their mother in the nearby trees. She waved dinner at them, and they eventually flew to join her. And now I knew that they would spend the summer together, supporting one another as they grew into their feathers and learned to hunt on their own. Perhaps right now somewhere in Bakersfield their hoots are ringing through the woods.

If you want to embark on a similar virtual experience with a bird family, visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's website to find active nest cams around the country: <http://watch.birds.cornell.edu/nestcams/home/index>. But don't say I didn't warn you about getting attached to these creatures!