

**Follow the day-to-day adventures of an owl family recorded in an artist's nature journal.**

# WhOoo's Watching?

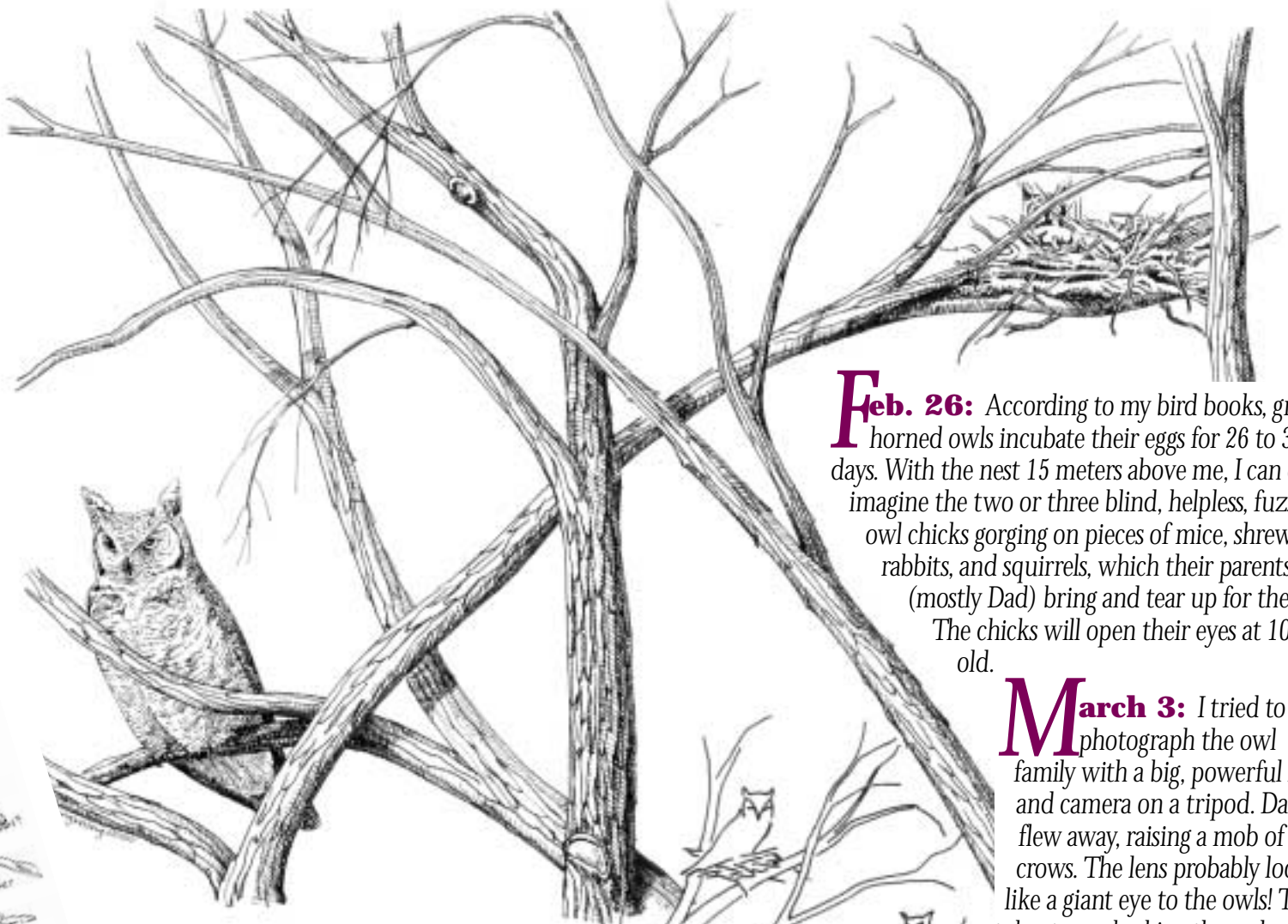
**Jan. 28:** If you want the local wildlife gossip, listen to the crows. My dog Grisha and I were returning from our usual trek around University of Minnesota farm fields and the state fairgrounds in St. Paul, observing urban wildlife. Blocks away, I heard the raucous alarm caws that crows make when they find predators. I scanned a tall elm with my binoculars. A horde of crows surrounded

a tangle of twigs. I looked closer and saw two tufts poking out. They were feathers, the "horns" or "ears" of a large great horned owl, lying in an old crow nest. Great horned owls don't build their own nests. They just take over other birds' nests from the previous summer.

After years of searching woodlands in midwinter for an owl's nest, I was amazed to find one three blocks from my home in the city. Wearing gloves against the cold, I sketched the tree and nest. Eventually, the crows trailed off.

**Jan. 30:** I told only a few friends about the owl. Owl (probably Mom) must be used to humans, to choose a nest on a block from a busy street. But how many owl-watcher would she tolerate before abandoning her nest?

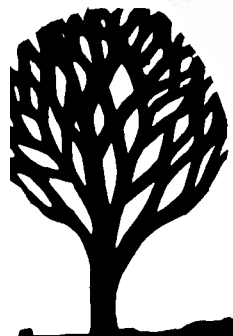
**Feb. 12:** Mice, shrews, tree and ground squirrels, skunks, raccoons, woodchucks, rabbits, and an occasional duck live in nearby pastures, trees, and pond—good hunting for owls! Grisha sniffed out several owl pellets a few blocks from the nest tree. Owls regurgitate dry, cylindrical pellets of undigested hair and bones from the small animals they swallow whole. I'll carefully dissect each pellet to find out what the owl ate.



**Feb. 26:** According to my bird books, great horned owls incubate their eggs for 26 to 35 days. With the nest 15 meters above me, I can only imagine the two or three blind, helpless, fuzzy owl chicks gorging on pieces of mice, shrews, rabbits, and squirrels, which their parents (mostly Dad) bring and tear up for them. The chicks will open their eyes at 10 days old.

**March 3:** I tried to photograph the owl family with a big, powerful lens and camera on a tripod. Dad flew away, raising a mob of crows. The lens probably looked like a giant eye to the owls! They tolerate me looking through small binoculars to draw, but they objected to strange, huge eyeballs on legs. So I'll stick to recording their activities with paper and pen.

**Feb. 20:** Another owl in the nest tree! I read that Dad brings food to Mom while she keeps the eggs warm, but I couldn't find him until now.



**March 15:** White, fluffy snowballs with dark eyes and beaks peeked above the nest rim. The chicks hopped around the nest, stretched their tiny, fuzz-covered, featherless wings, and climbed to the edge to expel their waste.

she been watching us? Grisha and I turned away, toward the nest tree. Suddenly, behind me, Grisha yelped. I spun around. The huge owl was floating silently upward into a tree. Back home, I found two long, shallow, parallel scratches on Grisha's rump. Owl had raked

Grisha's rump with her sharp talons. Was she trying to grab Grisha? At 48 pounds, Grisha's much too heavy for her to carry. A great horned owl

weighs only 3 to 4 pounds, and can carry prey up to perhaps twice its own weight. This owl was warning us: Stay away from my chicks!

**March 18:** Walking in winter's early dark, I glanced up to find Mom staring at us from atop a telephone pole. *Whoooo* was watching *whoooooom*? Owls don't see much color, but they see much better at night than humans do. How long had

**March 28:** Both parents now hunt to feed the hungry owlets, leaving them home alone. Like many raptors, female owls are usually larger than males. Does Mom, being larger, bring bigger game for the growing owlets?

**April 6:** Last night a storm rampaged through our neighborhood. The unruly winds blew away the owls' nest. Luckily, the owlets were strong enough to grip the branches with their talons, so they weren't blown away too. Their growing feathers help them stay warm and shed water, but Mom still shields them from wind and rain with her body and wings.

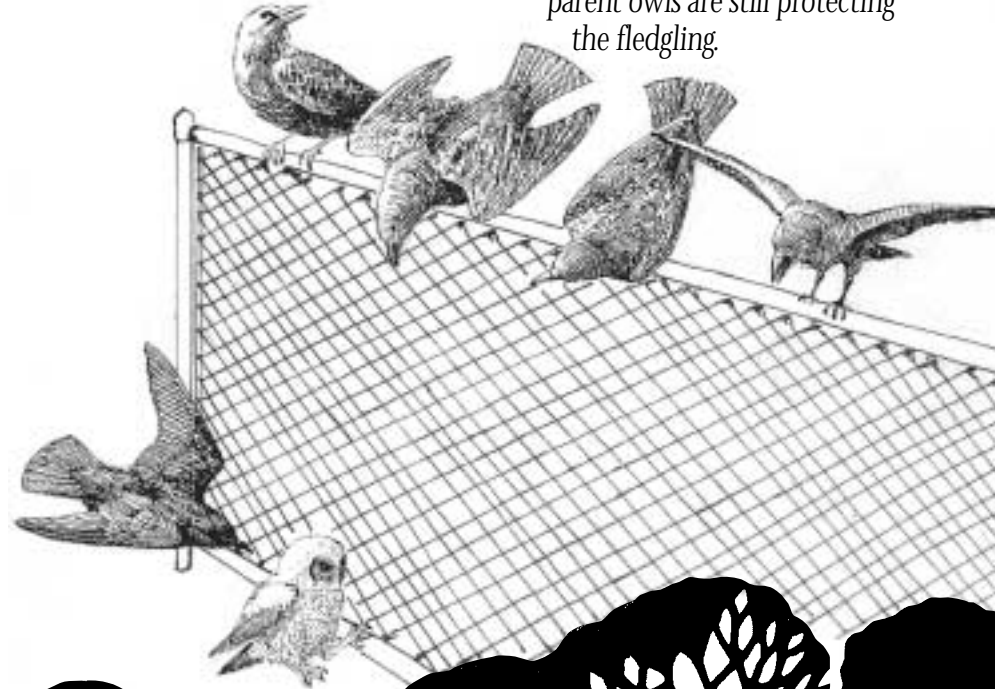
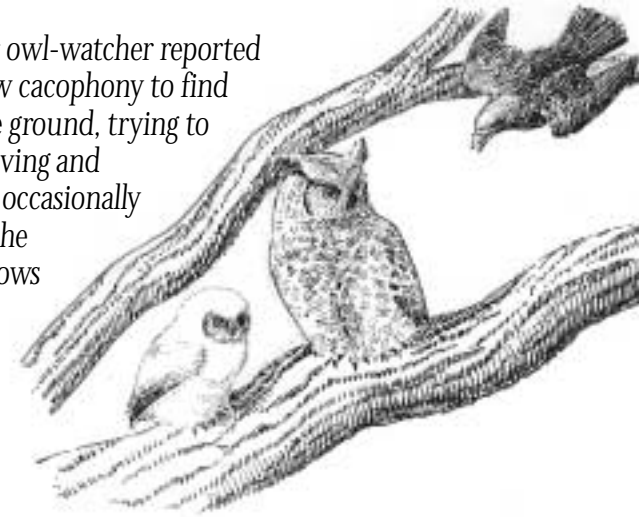
**April 10:** An owl-watching friend found one owlet a couple of blocks west in a row of enormous cottonwood trees. This downy owlet already had enough feathers to fly! The other, still in the nest tree, appeared larger. Is it older, hatched from the first egg laid? Why didn't it fledge also? Is it too heavy for its immature feathers to lift? Or did the younger one flee its more competitive, aggressive sibling? Watching these owls

raises more questions than answers.

The parents flew back and forth amid upset crows, trying to protect and feed both the fledgling in the cottonwoods and the "unfledged" in the nest tree.

**April 18:** A neighbor owl-watcher reported that she followed a crow cacophony to find the "unfledged" owlet on the ground, trying to climb a fence. Crows were diving and pecking at it. Mom and Dad occasionally scattered the harassers, but the more numerous and agile crows evaded the bigger owls. The owlet suffered several jabs. Concerned, my neighbor called The Raptor Center. She was told that humans shouldn't interfere if the

parent owls are still protecting the fledgling.





**April 20:** First fledgling was still in its huge, bare cottonwood. But we've been looking for second fledgling for several days. Searching for the missing owl, I heard screams and caws from the cottonwoods. Crows were diving at something. What? Then all but one crow dispersed. Why was this single crow so aggressive? My binoculars revealed a small adult owl hunched under a branch to avoid attacks. But the screams were coming from the flyer, not the owl. I focused on the dive-bomber. A dark mask over white covered its face. This "crow" was actually a peregrine falcon. That explained the screaming, the aggressive diving, and the quick, agile turns. Great horned owls eat young peregrines. This falcon tried hard to drive the owl away but eventually gave up and flew off.



### Learn More About Owls

To learn more about owls, consult:

*Tiger With Wings: The Great Horned Owl*, by Barbara Juster Esbensen, illustrated by Mary Barrett Brown.

*One Man's Owl*, by Bernd Heinrich.

*Hunters of the Sky*, an activity guide on birds of prey, by Educational Resources, Science Museum of Minnesota.

The Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota, 612-624-4745: information, research, and rehabilitation for hawks, eagles, falcons, and owls.

James Ford Bell  
Museum of Natural  
History, University of Minnesota,  
612-624-7083: exhibits and bookstore.

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**April 23:** Owl family reunited!

**April 29:** Soon leaves will pop out and hide this unusually tolerant owl family. My drawing opportunities are waning.

**May 15:** I found the young owls amid the leaves and catkins of the "sprung" cottonwoods. One was eating. Had they already learned to hunt? Or did Mom bring them a snack?



**O**ctober: We haven't seen the owl family together for months. Following caws occasionally still leads us to an owl hidden in foliage. One of "our" owlets or a parent? Or an unknown migrant, sheltering in large trees in an urban landscape? Without leg bands to see or knowledge of individual markings, I can't tell. I assume the fledglings learned to hunt on their own, and the parents expanded their hunting territories. I'll keep watching. The parents may return this winter or next and raise another clutch of owlets. But this territory can support

only one family of owls. The fledglings will have to find their own mates and new territories to raise their own families.

Meanwhile, the gossipy crows continue to show me their ecological community of owls, crows, peregrines, mice, squirrels, rabbits, skunks, and trees. They reveal the constantly shifting balances among predators, prey, plants, and people.

What will these wild ones teach us if we watch? Can we learn to share this world with them as they struggle to survive with us?

Let your local wild friends introduce you to their world too. Whether your habitat is town or country, walk your neighborhoods with watchful eyes. You may encounter an astounding natural drama. ♣

