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THE WORLD OF NATURE



BIRDS
OF THE NIGHT

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E. BÖSIGER and P. FAUCHER



OLIVER AND BOYD

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Greek coin picturing the little owl, the emblem of Athene

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Contents

	PAGE
Introduction	7
General Remarks	12
Comparative Table	18
Barn Owl	21
Tawny Owl	42
Little Owl	48
Pygmy Owl	54
Tengmalm's Owl	56
Hawk Owl	59
Snowy Owl	61
Long-eared Owl	66
Eagle Owl	76
Scops Owl	82
Short-eared Owl	84
Conclusion	90





As soon as the sun sets the wild creatures who all day long have been hunting down their prey, browsing on the grass, or sipping the nectar of the flowers—creeping, running or flying—withdraw to their hiding-places and fall asleep.

For a few moments, life seems to have come to a standstill. Then, little by little, the night shift takes over. The small rodents leave their holes, the fox begins to prowl, the otter dives into the stream, the bat flits out of the barn, the moths flutter through the darkness.

The birds are almost all asleep, perched on the branches or snuggled down in their nests; but there are a few who remain wakeful. On fine spring nights the harsh cry of the reed warbler can be heard, the wood-lark pipes in the field, and in the copse the nightingale is singing, its notes sounding through the stillness, now low and sweet, now rising to a torrent of melody.



Song thrush

On a moonlit summer night the song thrush can still be heard along the hedgerows and in the thickets; the mallard continues its hunt for frogs; and high in the sky the swifts swoop and soar until dawn.

Then, as autumn approaches and the days grow shorter, thousands of migrating birds set out at night on their southward course.

The only passerine which is purely nocturnal is the nightjar, which spends the day crouching under the heather, waiting for the evening when it can go out in quest of insects to feed its young.

Nightjar landing beside its young



But the true night birds, the real lords of the darkness, are the nocturnal birds of prey.

The night shrouds them in mystery. They are little known. Yet they exercise a peculiar fascination on the minds of men. The delicate feathers of the facial disc fluffed up round each eye socket, the hooked beak, and the direct fixed stare of the large eyes give them a strange appearance which strikes the imagination. It is hardly surprising that throughout the ages these birds have given rise to so many superstitions, been ardently worshipped or ferociously hunted down. Among the Greeks the owl was the emblem of Athene, the symbol of far-seeing wisdom; but in the Middle Ages it became the attribute of witches and the devil, and in our own day is still regarded as a bird of evil omen. People become uneasy when they hear its eerie cry in the night, when they see it flitting round the houses or landing on a roof, and by magical practices or incantations try to protect themselves against its baleful influence.

And yet owls do yeoman service in destroying rats, field mice, and all the other rodents which batten on our crops. They are the unrecognised allies of the farmers; wherever owls choose to live, the land is well defended.

This book deals with the nocturnal birds of prey of Europe, and omits only the Ural owl and the Lapland owl, which are never found in Western Europe.

A few general remarks will give some idea of their characteristics and way of life.



Long-eared owl



Everything about the owls marks them out as hunters: their claws, their formidable beaks, their piercing sight, their acute hearing and their noiseless flight.

The beak appears to be short, but this is a misleading impression: it is almost entirely concealed under the facial feathers. In young birds which are not yet fully feathered its true size is more easily seen (see the photograph on page 34), and emphasises the narrowness of the skull with its four large cavities for the eyes and the ears. The upper jaw, which is strongly arched, overhangs the lower, which is fully exposed only when the bird turns down its feathers and opens its beak (as in the photograph above).

The eyes are handsome and very striking, quite different from those of any other bird. They are light yellow, golden or brown, set almost in the same plane, and, like human eyes, looking forward in the same direction. They are fixed in their wide sockets with no power of movement, and can only see properly straight in front. This limits their field of vision, but the deficiency is made good by the mobility of the owl's head, which can turn through 270 degrees and thus observe what is happening all round it.

Eagle owl seen from behind, with its head turned through 180 degrees



Like all birds, owls see better by day than by night, but their vision is so highly developed that they can distinguish and pursue their prey in darkness.

Their hearing is very acute. They can pick up the sound of the most light-footed rodent moving in the grass, or the slightest brush of a bird's feathers against a branch. The more nocturnal the species, the more delicate and refined is its sense of hearing. Thus in the long-eared owl and Tengmalm's owl the ear cavities are so broad that they take up the whole of the side of the skull, and are shaped in such a way as to detect accurately the direction from which any sound is coming. Some owls have two feathery tufts on their heads, but these have no connection with their ears.

Owls do their hunting either by lying in wait for their prey or by flying over their territory close to the ground. Because of the soft fringed edges of their long feathers, their flight is quite noiseless: no sound embarrasses the hunter in tracking down his victim by ear, no sound warns the victim of the imminence of danger. The owl swoops straight down on his prey, seizes it and strangles it with his claws, and crushes its head in his strong beak. On the ground, he runs after a rodent seeking to escape him; in flight, he sweeps after a fleeing bird.



Little owl in flight

Small animals are swallowed whole, larger ones are torn to pieces. Birds are plucked in a rough and ready way.

The parts which can be assimilated are digested, and the residue—bones, fur or feathers—forms in the stomach a compact pellet which is later regurgitated. The bringing up of the pellet marks the end of a meal, and the owl is then ready to swallow the next victim. Sometimes, however, when food is abundant, it may voluntarily bring up half-digested prey in order to swallow something else. Examination of these pellets—which are produced by all birds of prey whether diurnal or nocturnal—has enabled us to determine the feeding habits of owls.



From left to right, pellets of little owl, long-eared owl, short-eared owl, tawny owl and barn owl

In winter some species, fleeing from the cold or from famine, migrate to areas where the climate is milder or food is more plentiful, but most owls spend the hard season on their normal hunting grounds.

About the month of January males and females begin calling to each other during the night. Then they pair off, and a few weeks later, in an old abandoned nest, in a hollow tree, or merely in the grass, the hen lays her first egg. Three or four others follow at intervals of one or two days. Between twenty-four and thirty-seven days later, according to the species, the young ones break



out of the eggs and the rearing of the family begins.

It is then the responsibility of the male to feed the whole family. The young ones become more and more voracious, and the spring nights grow shorter and shorter. The male owl is forced to do his hunting during the day, exposing himself to the noisy attacks of sparrows who mob him as he passes. Then gradually the female is able to leave the young ones alone on the nest and resume hunting. The two parents continue the pursuit of the small creatures who form their prey until at last the young brood falls asleep, sated and content. This period of intense activity coincides with the time when rodents are abundant in the fields among the young crops.

We know very little about the age which owls can reach in natural conditions. In favourable circumstances in captivity a barn owl has reached the age of 13, a tawny owl 16, a snowy owl $24\frac{1}{2}$, and an eagle owl 68.



Eagle owl



Snowy owl



Tawny owl



Short-eared owl

In the picture above the various European owls are arranged in order of size, and their characteristic appearance is shown in order to facilitate recognition in the field.

The reader is recommended to refer back to the picture each time a new species is mentioned in this book. It will then be easy to see how the different species compare with each other.

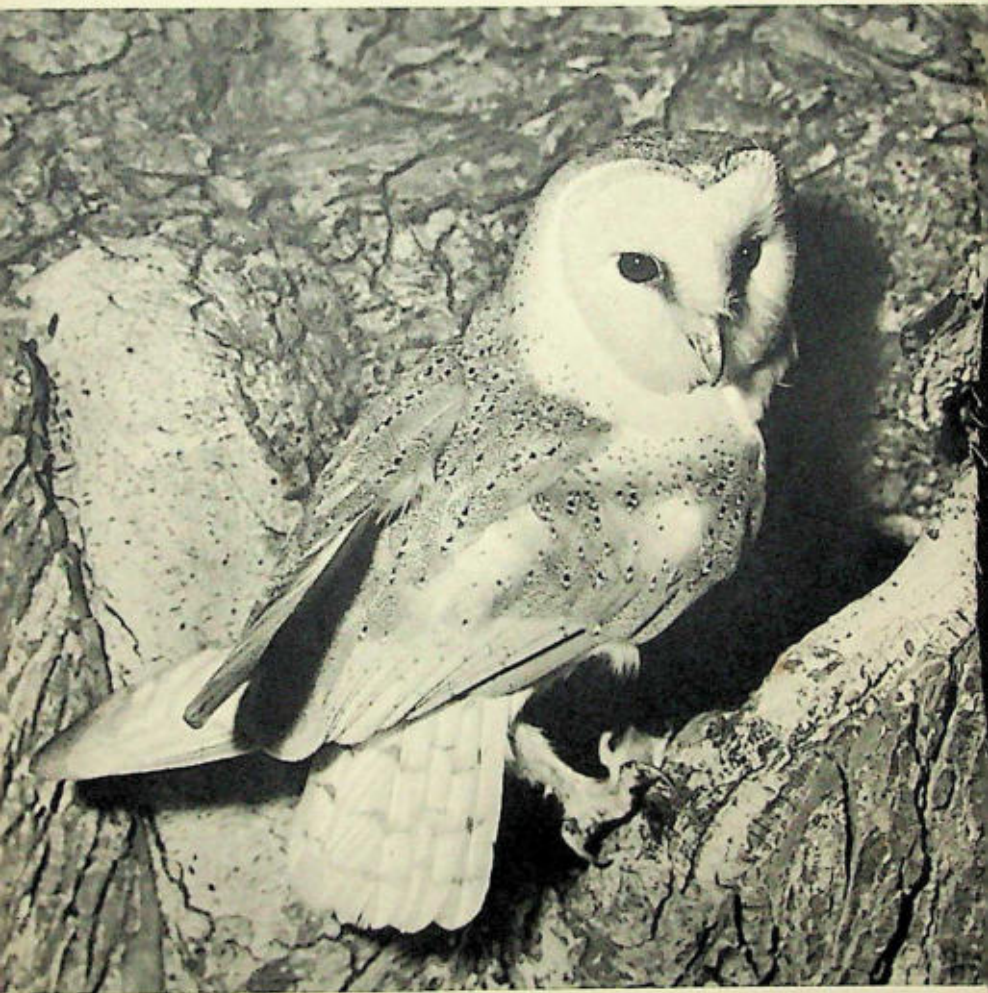
We begin with the barn owl, which is treated at some length in order to illustrate particularly the development of the young birds and the activities of the parents during the rearing of their brood.



Barn owl Long-eared owl Tengmalm's owl Little owl Hawk owl Scops owl Pygmy owl

	S	W	E	I
Eagle owl	28	70-90	1-5	32-37
Snowy owl	20-26	70	2-10	30-34
Tawny owl	15	8-12	4-5	28-30
Short-eared owl	15	12	4-8	24-29
Barn owl	13	8-12	4-5	20-31
Long-eared owl	14	6-10	5-6	27-28
Tengmalm's owl	10	4	4-7	25-31
Little owl	8	5-6	4-5	28
Hawk owl	14-16		3-9	
Scops owl	7		4-5	24-25
Pygmy owl	6	2-2½	4-8	30

S = size in inches. W = average weight in ounces.
 E = average number of eggs per brood. I = period of incubation, in days.



Barn Owl

The barn owl used to live in woods, nesting in hollow trees. Nowadays it prefers to live in proximity to man. It is the barn owl we sometimes hear wheezing and snoring in the attics of old houses, at the top of steeples or of ruined towers. And the white shape we see flitting softly round houses in the darkness, then settling in some corner and uttering its eerie cry—that too is the barn owl.

This pretty little owl is quite harmless to man, but has sometimes been the cause of dread quite out of keeping with its inoffensive appearance; many a whispering spirit, many a soul groaning in pain, many a prowling ghost has been no more than the barn owl about its nightly business.

The barn owl is about the size of a pigeon. Its plumage is strikingly beautiful: soft, delicately coloured and patterned. Its general colouring is light—almost pure white, tinged with buff and pale grey. Its head, wings and tail are finely speckled or striped with brown and black. The patches of colour are larger and darker in the female than in the male. The little feathers spraying out round the beak and eyes form an unusually well shaped facial disc, giving the bird's face an attractive heart shape.



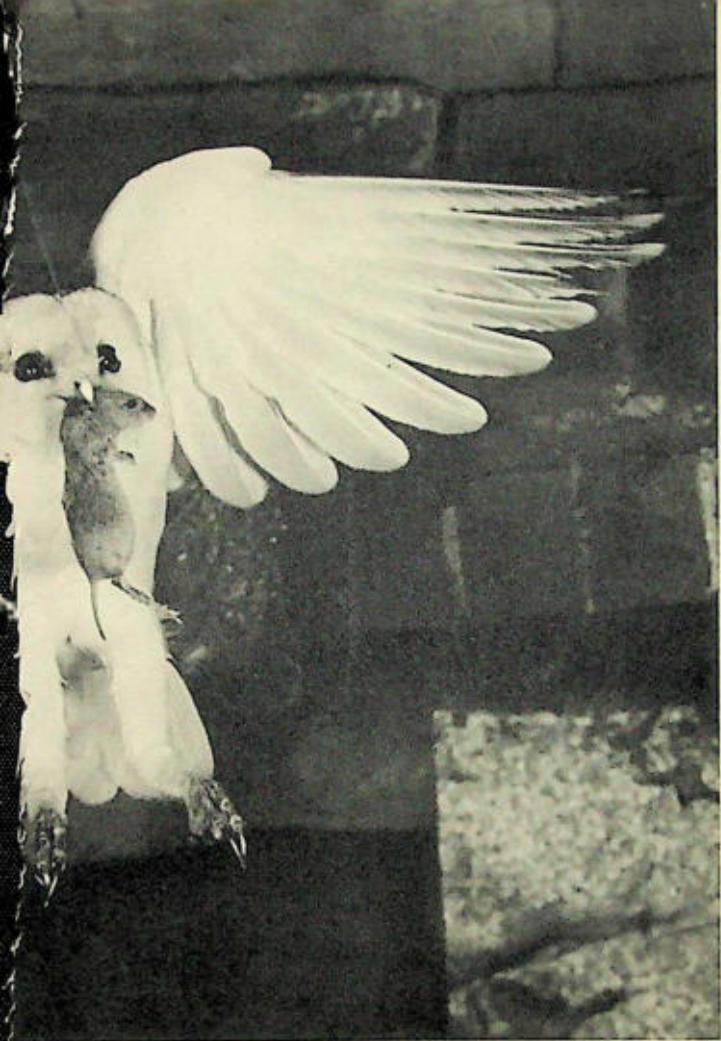
This barn owl is the female of a pair which lives and nests in a barn. This is the first time she has been out hunting since she started laying. As the eldest of her family is a fortnight old and the youngest a week, she can leave them by themselves for a few moments and help the male in providing food for the family.

In mild and dry weather there is plenty of food to be had: the rodents are nibbling busily in the fields, the moles are out looking for grubs, and the bats are darting about round the farmhouse.

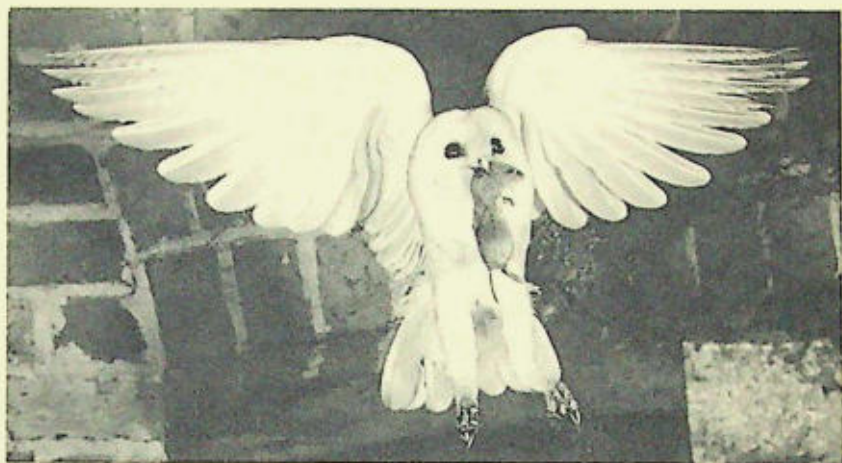
The barn owl has just killed a shrew in the kitchen garden. We see her landing on a large stone on the sill of the loft window. From there she inspects the inside of the building. She hears the squalling of her young. But tonight all is well: there is food enough for all of them.



This time it is the male who is bringing back a vole in his beak. He has just taken off from the window ledge and is flying down to his nest in the barn.



The photographs of him on pages 26 and 27 were taken at different times in the course of the night. They show the four main phases of flight.



1. *The owl spreads its wings upward*



2. *The wings begin the downward stroke*



3. *The wings in the half-way position*



4. *The owl brings its wings forward*



1. The owl has just launched itself from the window ledge. It has sprung into the air and has immediately begun to draw its wings upward, spreading the long primary feathers or remiges (page 26).

2. The active phase of flight—the movement which will send the bird forward—is beginning. In this the wings will beat the air, moving down and forward in a single movement. The primaries are now drawn close together; the wings offer the greatest possible area of resistance to the air; they pivot on themselves, bringing the rear edge slightly forward. The wings bend and curve under the power and speed of the stroke (page 26).

3. The stroke is at the half-way position and is reaching its maximum power (page 27).

4. The active phase of the flight is completed. The air passes through the feathers of the wings in their forward position; the bird is about to return to the heraldic attitude of phase 1 (page 26).

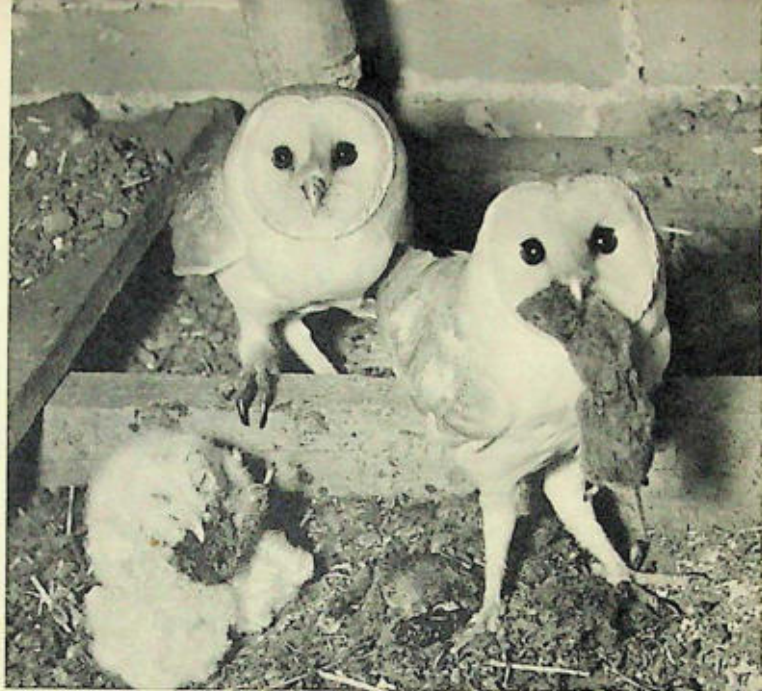


When she is not hunting, the female broods her young. The small birds lie on the bare ground, amid shreds of vegetable matter and dried pellets. Under the mother's wing can be seen the beak and closed eye of one of the young.

The female holds the vole which the male has just given her. In front of her is the damp and glistening pellet which she has just brought up. The young ones have eaten their fill, and now she herself can enjoy a meal.

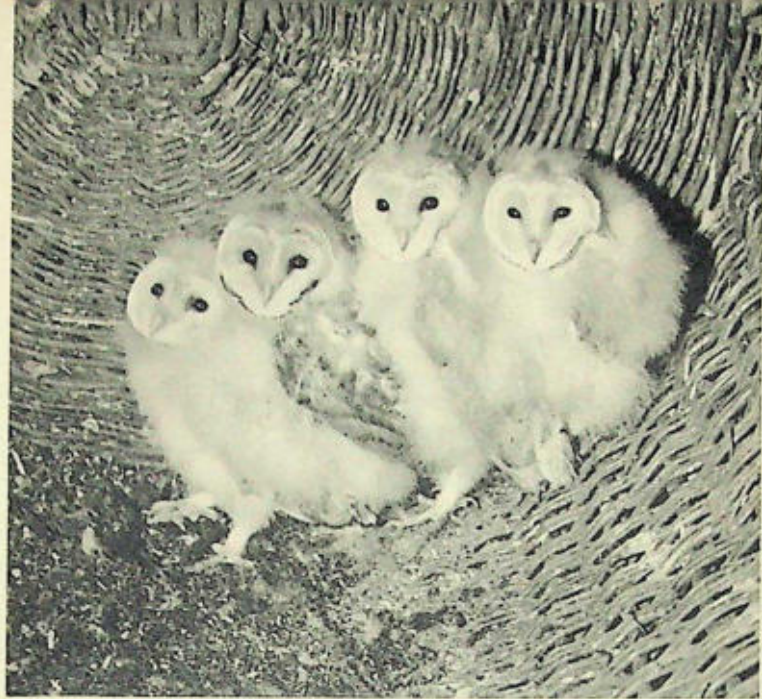
On this occasion the male has brought his catch to the nest, but often when he comes back from his hunting he lands on a rafter in the barn; then, perching on one foot, he calls softly to his mate, offering her a vole. She flies over to him; they snap their beaks, as if whispering to one another, then separate.





In this photograph both parents have just returned from hunting. The male has brought back another vole. The female has also killed a vole, and has given it to one of her young, who can be seen on the top of the downy mass formed by the rest of the brood. As he cannot swallow the skull of such a large animal his mother has taken care to tear it off and eat it herself: the feathers round her beak are still stained with blood.

The store of food in the nest is mounting up. Barn owls, like other owls, like to have something in reserve. The reserve food is eaten on rainy days or may sometimes be left to rot.



The young barn owls take markedly longer to develop than other owls. It is not until about the fourth week that the first sparse down is replaced by a thicker growth and that the feathers of the wings and tail begin to sprout.

Each day the facial disc grows larger, and the plumage now grows so fast that differences in age between young birds in the same brood are very marked.

These young barn owls live in an old basket left lying in a barn. The eldest (second from the left) is forty-five days old, and the youngest (first left) thirty-five.



The young ones grow hungrier every day. As soon as they see one of their parents coming they rush forward excitedly, pushing each other and squeezing in front of the parent, uttering harsh cries. The three in this photograph (the third is hidden behind the other two) are in no danger of starvation. But in a large brood it sometimes happens that the older and stronger birds seize all the food, leaving the younger ones to die of starvation.



The female has scarcely landed before one of the brood snatches the mole from her beak.

In order to protect their eyes both birds half lower their translucent eyelids and slightly close their opaque lids.

In its haste the young bird raises its wings, which are already well feathered, but still too downy and too short to allow it to fly.



The young of this other brood are about seven weeks old. They belong to a sub-species with darker plumage. At this age their likeness to the adult bird—in this case their mother, in the foreground—is more marked.

By the time they are nine weeks old they are almost as large as their parents (page 37). The youngest ones have not yet lost the down on their underparts. The second from the left is probably



the oldest. Alone of the family, he has adopted the characteristic posture of an owl seeking to escape an observer's notice: sitting quite still with his wings pressed against his body, his legs extended and his eyes closed. The younger ones have not yet acquired this instinctive reflex camouflage.

The father, on the extreme right, is used to the photographer's presence and is no longer afraid of him.

Barn owls like to lean against a wall or huddle against one another, like these two handsome young birds of about two and a half months old.

For them the time has come to leave the nest, and they are ready for their first flight. Their parents will go with them, guiding them and teaching them all they need to know to defend and feed themselves in the life of the wild which they will soon be joining.

For some time after leaving the nest the young birds live near it, on some perch of their own choosing. Every evening they cry and wheeze until their parents bring them titbits from the day's hunting.

It is not until they are about three months old, and are able to feed themselves, that they leave their birthplace for good. Their parents no longer recognise them and drive them away from their territory as ruthlessly as they would any other intruders.



The young birds of the year range over the countryside, questing for food, until the middle of winter. Barn owls are not fond of damp or low temperatures, and it is perhaps with the idea of seeking protection against the weather that they have chosen to lodge in the dwellings of man.

About February, or later if the winter has been hard, each male chooses his own hunting ground, which he patrols at night, hooting to mark his presence, and which he defends savagely. Then he chooses one or two suitable places within this area to store his spoils. At night he 'sings' to announce his whereabouts to the females. When one of them responds he guides her to his stores of food, and mating takes place. The two birds then choose a nest, which the female at once begins to watch and defend. In this nest she lays four or five eggs; when food is abundant she may lay up to ten or twelve.





Tawny Owl

Any fine night in winter or spring we may hear the deep 'hoo-hoo-hoo' of the tawny owl, interspersed with trills and brief periods of silence. He is at home in any area where there are trees.

The tawny owl shown in the photograph above spends the day perched on the branch of a beech tree, leaning against the trunk; it is almost invisible, so well does its grey and brown plumage blend with the colouring of the bark. With its handsome dark eyes almost closed, it watches all that is happening around it, and its ears are alert to the slightest sound. If it sees that its hiding-place has been discovered, or suspects the imminence of any danger, it flies off covertly through the undergrowth in search of some safer retreat.

The tawny owl usually nests in hollow trees. The one shown in the photograph on the right has been surprised in the act of entering its nest. Its wing is raised, so that it seems to be wearing a kind of ruff.



More rarely, it chooses a crevice in the rocks, a squirrel's or a buzzard's nest, or a rabbit's burrow. Exceptionally, it lays its eggs on the bare ground, in a shallow hole which it may or may not line with dried leaves.

The female shown in the photograph has made her nest amid twigs and brushwood in a small clearing. She has just brought back a mouse. There is no shortage of food, for in the nest can be seen a water-rat and another mouse. The young ones, cheeping shrilly, are clamouring for their share. Their eyes are not yet open, and on the tip of their beaks can still be seen the whitish protuberance of the egg-tooth.

The mother remains on the nest, and the father goes out alone at dusk to do the hunting. There are still many birds hopping about in the branches and singing. As soon as the blackbirds and robins catch sight of the owl they become violently excited and screech at the top of their voices. Surprised and frightened, the owl makes his escape. The tits pursue him boldly: he does not look round, but he can hear them fluttering behind him. He is appalled by the turmoil he has roused, and hastens away to hide until it has blown over.

After a while he sets out again. He has many different ways of hunting. Usually he flies over his territory close to the ground, swooping on voles and field-mice, which are his normal quarry. If they try to get away he runs after them on the ground. At other times he lies in wait for his prey, remaining absolutely silent and motionless.



Occasionally he goes hunting for bats, fish and frogs, and sometimes even for other owls, hawks, squirrels or partridges. He may, too, snatch an occasional young bird from the nest, or prowls along the hedgerows to catch a sparrow unawares.

While the male is out hunting the female waits for him on the nest, mewling softly. When he approaches the nest on his return he responds with a resonant 'hoo-hoo'. At once his mate quivers into activity and flies up to meet the returning hunter, who has settled near the nest. He gives her his catch, flutters about for a few moments calling to her, then disappears again. When calm is restored the female returns to her brood.



This young tawny owl is just a month old. He has emerged from the nest for a short outing on a branch. He is covered with fluffy greyish down, streaked with brown. On each side of his beak, which is still without any feathers, the edges of his wide mouth appear as a dark line.

The two seen on the right have reached the stage of venturing a little farther among the trees each day. Their eyes are bluish and still dull. When the lens has become transparent the colour will change to dark brown like that of the parents' eyes.



Little Owl

The little owl is very different from the tawny owl. Smaller, lighter and more active, it has a flattened head and plumage regularly dappled in brownish grey and creamy white. Its facial disc is not particularly prominent. Its low forehead and lemon yellow eyes give it an angry and aggressive air which is very characteristic.

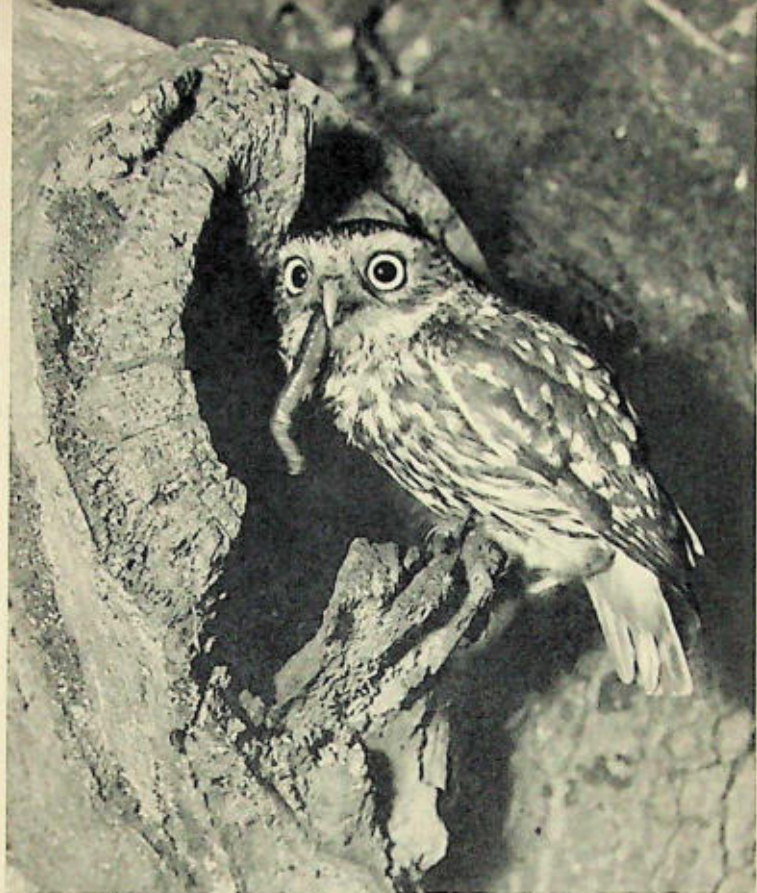
In spring the little owl is sometimes seen in full daylight, near houses, in gardens or orchards, or in open spaces in towns. But it is not easy to approach. It takes fright at the slightest sound, and when it realises that it has been seen it does a kind of war dance, huddling down with its legs bent, then suddenly opening out like a spring.

Its nest may be a hole under the eaves of an old building, a woodpecker's nest or a rabbit's burrow, but as a rule it prefers a hollow tree.

The little owl likes to lie in wait for its quarry on a high branch or at the top of a dead tree. On the ground it can run after its prey with surprising agility.







The little owl catches cockchafers in flight and destroys large quantities of insects. It hunts rats, voles, weasels and young rabbits, and if larger prey is lacking falls back on worms, slugs, lizards and frogs. It will even eat grass, leaves or other vegetable matter.

When they are a month old the young birds have their first outing. During the day they warm themselves in the sun; at night they screech at the top of their voices for their parents to come and feed them.

The two shown in the photograph, who are about six weeks old, have left the nest for good and are able to forage for themselves. They are now quite independent. One of them is clinging to the branch with three toes in front and one behind, as most birds do; the other has put two toes behind and two in front, as owls usually do.

The young bird on the left—the one looking towards the camera—has one eye in shadow and one in the light; the pupils, therefore, are unequally dilated.





Pygmy Owl

The pygmy owl is the least nocturnal of the European owls. It is also the smallest.

No bigger than a lark, it is so light that it scarcely weighs down the delicate sprig on which it is perched. The brown plumage of its head is prettily spotted with white.

At night the pygmy owl—unexpectedly enough for a nocturnal bird of prey—rests and sleeps. Its hunting is done during the day and at dusk.

It preys mainly on the passerine birds, pursuing them on the wing or swooping down on them among the branches. It carries off its catch into a place of safety, usually a hole in a tree, which also serves as a larder. There it plucks them, tears them into pieces and eats them, leaving



the skulls and the larger bones which it cannot swallow. Insects are a quarry more in keeping with its size, and it pursues them with its darting flight.

In the great coniferous forests of the Alps, the Jura and the Vosges, and in the mountains of Northern Europe the pygmy owl leads a sequestered life, far from human habitation. It is very rarely seen, but is a little more frequently heard. In spring and autumn both males and females give a tuneful high-pitched cry as they flit about among the firs, larches and spruce.





Tengmalm's Owl

This owl, which owes its name to the Swedish ornithologist H. K. Tengmalm, is relatively rare in Western Europe. It leads a wandering life in the great forests in the mountains: sleeping wherever chance dictates, changing its hunting ground continually, but never leaving its forest, even in winter.

It comes out only at night. Its hearing is of extraordinary delicacy. Its broad asymmetrical ears take up the whole of the rear part of its head. Thanks to this sensitive detector, Tengmalm's



owl can hear and pursue, in pitch darkness, the small rodents, young birds, frogs, toads and insects which make up its diet. Although it is much the same size as the little owl, Tengmalm's owl does not swallow its prey whole, but tears it into small pieces. At the beginning of spring the female lays her eggs in a deserted woodpecker's nest, at the very top of a tree.

The young bird shown in the photograph above has been independent for several months. He still has the downy plumage which Tengmalm's owls keep until they are a year old.



Hawk Owl

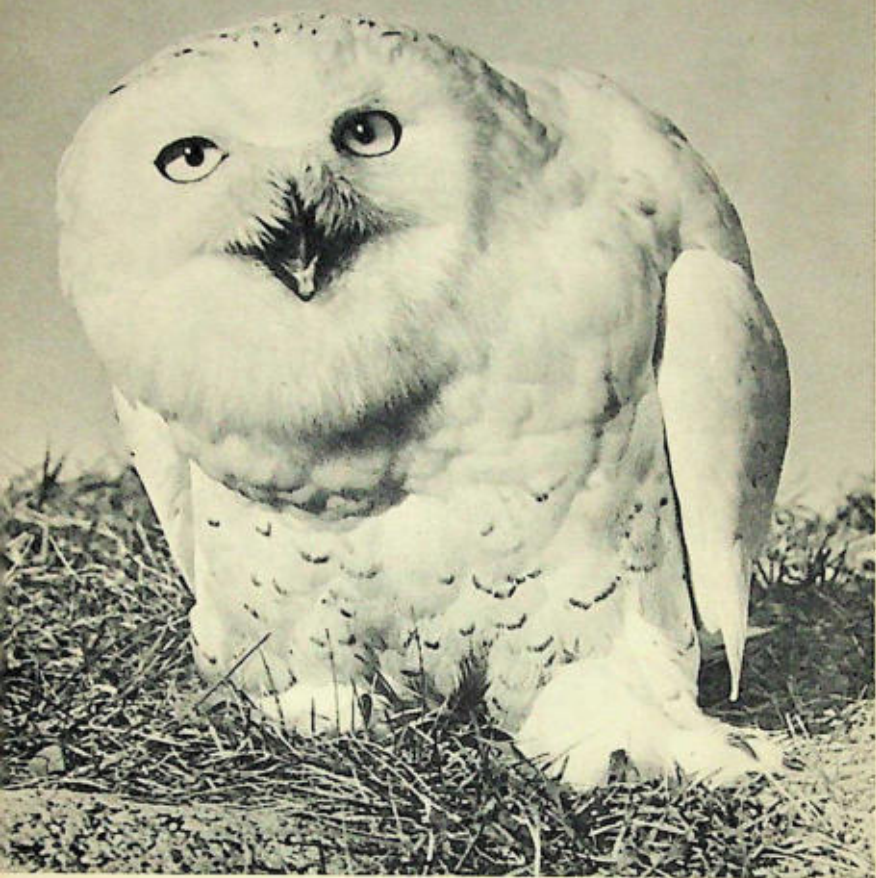
The hawk owl is well named; for with its small head, its flat forehead, its long tail and its plumage of dark brown, striped with white on the underparts, it is very similar in appearance to the sparrow-hawk.

It inhabits the great forests of the north. In exceptionally hard winters it may come as far south as the north and east of France.

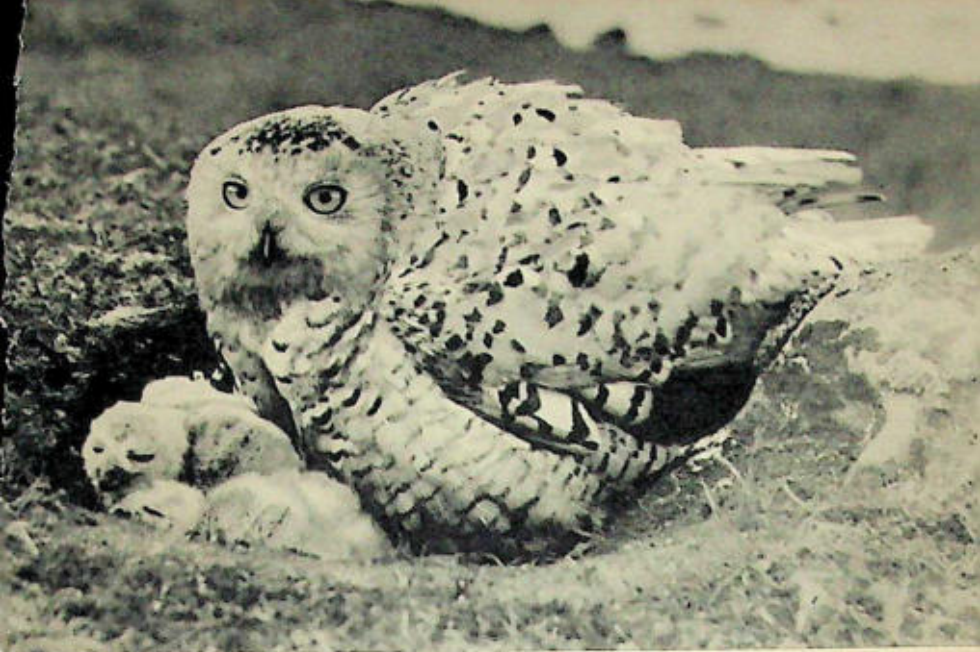
Sometimes, perched on the top of a tree, it watches, motionless, for lemmings and field mice; sometimes it hovers close to the ground ready to swoop on any small rodent which leaves its hiding place.

When it has made its kill it carries its victim off to a perch, stuffs it into its wide mouth—which can be seen stretching up almost to its eye—and swallows it whole, tail and all (photographs 1, 2, 3 and 4).





Snowy Owl



The snowy owl is very different from the other European owls. It is the biggest and heaviest of them all, with the exception of the eagle owl.

A thick coat of feathers covers its black beak and extends to the very tips of its claws. The male (photograph on the left) is almost uniformly white, while the female (above) is mottled with brown.

Like the little owl, the snowy owl has magnificent lemon yellow eyes, whose brilliance is increased by a black ring round the iris.

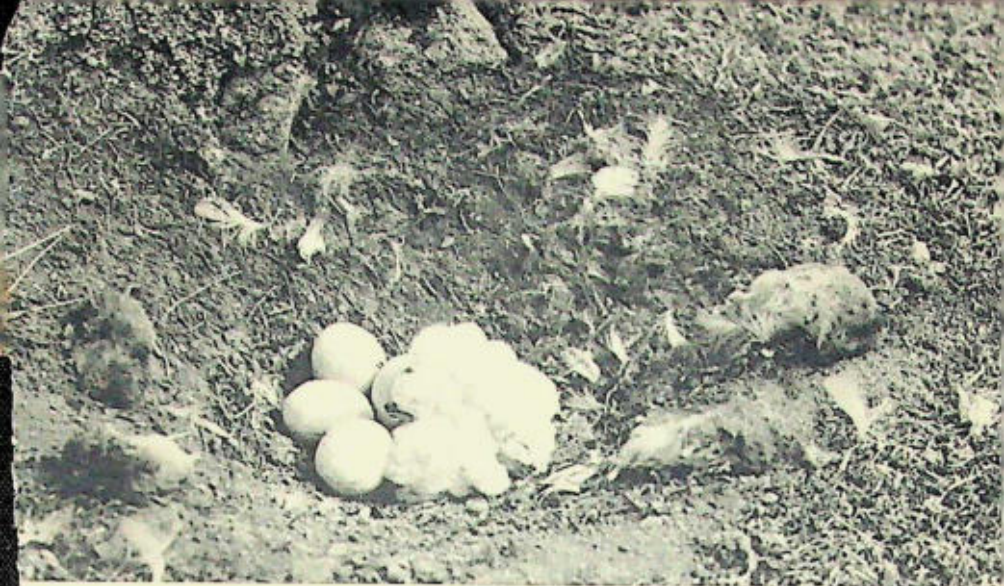
The snowy owl is a bird of the far north, inhabiting the tundra and the mountains of the Arctic. It preys on small rodents, hares and, more rarely, ptarmigan, doing its hunting during the day and at dusk.

This nest was found in Norway. It is no more than a shallow pit in the sparse turf. On the edge of the nest is a store of food; in the hollow are the eggs and young ones. Only a few feathers and a few twigs of heather separate the four white eggs and the three newly hatched chicks from the bare soil. All the warmth which enables the eggs to hatch and the young ones to thrive comes from the mother. Panic-stricken by the presence of the photographer, she has fled, but as soon as she is reassured, she will return to her brood.

The snowy owl protects its young ones very carefully against the cold. To make sure that they are properly covered the mother raises her ventral feathers and draws her extended wings round the young.

She does not get up even to feed them. She raises herself a little, and the strongest or the hungriest emerges to take the food which she offers with her eyes half closed.

The feathers on her back are ruffled by the wind, against which there is no protection in these desolate areas.





The meal is over and the mother has settled down again on her brood. One of the young ones has peeped out to see what is going on round him; he stares about him for a moment or two, until his mother pushes him back under the shelter of her body.

Like the hawk owl, the snowy owl migrates towards the south when the winter is too hard. It very rarely comes as far south as Western Europe.

Long-eared Owl

Eagle Owl

Scops Owl

Short-eared Owl

Long-eared Owl

The two feathered ear-tufts of the long-eared owl are quite distinctive. It is about the same size as the barn owl.

The long-eared owl inhabits woodland and forests, but unfortunately is no longer very common.

Of all the owls it is the most nocturnal in habit. Nevertheless, it likes to spread its wings in the sun or bathe in a pool during the day, but it is afraid of attracting the attention of buzzards, jays and sparrow-hawks, which attack it and ill-treat it. Accordingly, it prefers to spend the day in a tree, where the grey and brown colouring of its plumage blends with the bark. There it feels safe. It has a particular preference for conifers.

The female shown opposite has laid her five white eggs (only two are seen in the photograph) in a rook's nest. Although she spends almost all her time brooding, sitting absolutely motionless on her eggs, she has taken a few moments off to perch on a nearby branch and preen herself. She scratches her plumage with her claws to get rid of vermin, and then carefully smoothes her feathers. But she has been disturbed in her toilet and turns round to look for the intruder.





Here is the same female two days later, brooding her eggs during the night. She is anxious: she swells her plumage, lowers her ear-tufts, listens, and stares fixedly in the direction of those who are watching her.

Five weeks have passed, and the last young bird has just hatched (page 69). A fragment of shell is still sticking to its down: the mother will remove it shortly. She keeps a watchful eye on her surroundings to see whether anything threatens. But there is not a buzzard or a marten to be seen: it is safe to settle down on the nest again.





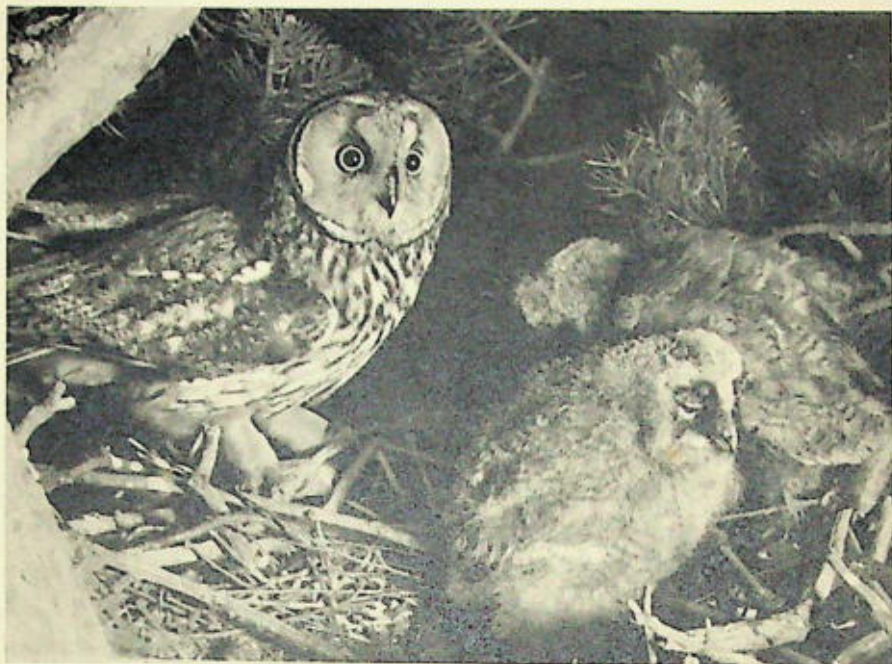
The male has just caught a rat. He weaves his way in total darkness between the interlacing branches without touching any of them. His wings are still half spread, for he has only just landed. He holds out his powerful claw towards his mate.

After he has handed over his catch he will fly away at once. Then he will call to the female, she will answer, and for a moment or two there will be a kind of long-distance conversation in the darkness.



In this other nest the alarm has been sounded. The mother has noticed the presence of strangers. She bristles all her feathers and spreads her wings wide. She presents a formidable appearance towards any attacker.

This aggressive attitude enables the observer to admire the splendours of her plumage. But let him beware! In defence of her brood the long-eared owl will not hesitate to attack man himself.



About their twenty-third day the young birds begin to explore the surroundings of the nest. The first time they go out their mother follows close behind them. With her ear-tufts down she looks quite different, and might be taken for a barn owl.

This long-eared owl (page 73) is twenty-eight days old. He has just flown for the first time. Under the grey-brown down can be seen the wing feathers. On his head are two tufts of down, the beginnings of the characteristic ear-tufts. After his flight he returns to the nest.







The two young long-eared owls opposite have left the nest for good, and live, rest and sleep in the trees. But they have not yet learnt to hunt, and their parents must still feed them for a few weeks longer.

The young bird shown above is fully independent. He does his own hunting and faces the dangers of life in the wild alone. Autumn is drawing near: soon he will join up with other young birds, and together they will range over the countryside until the following spring. It is quite exceptional for the long-eared owl to migrate during the cold season.

Eagle Owl

The eagle owl is the most powerful and the handsomest of the European owls. His long ear-tufts, his orange-coloured eyes, and his abundant plumage combine to give him a magnificent appearance.

Unfortunately, like so many other species, the eagle owl has fallen a victim to man's urge to destroy. The survivors have fled from human habitation and withdrawn to wilder regions.

They live in areas of high mountain, on wooded slopes and inaccessible crags. In the dusk of the evening they may be seen soaring over the steep rock faces and the gorges which by day are the haunt of the golden eagle.

The eagle owl does his hunting at dusk and dawn. He glides through the air at a leisurely pace, giving an occasional beat of his great rounded wings (which have a span of over five feet). In this way he covers the whole of his territory, which may extend over several miles.

During the day he sometimes selects a tree to hide in, but his nest is on the bare ground or in a cleft in the rocks (pages 78, 79).

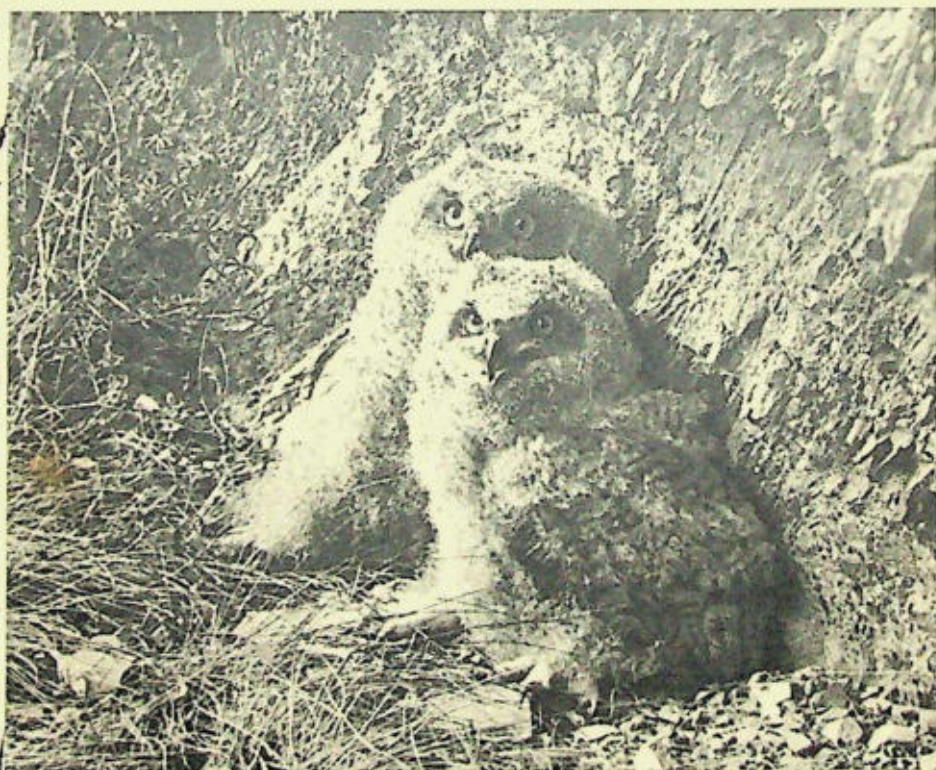
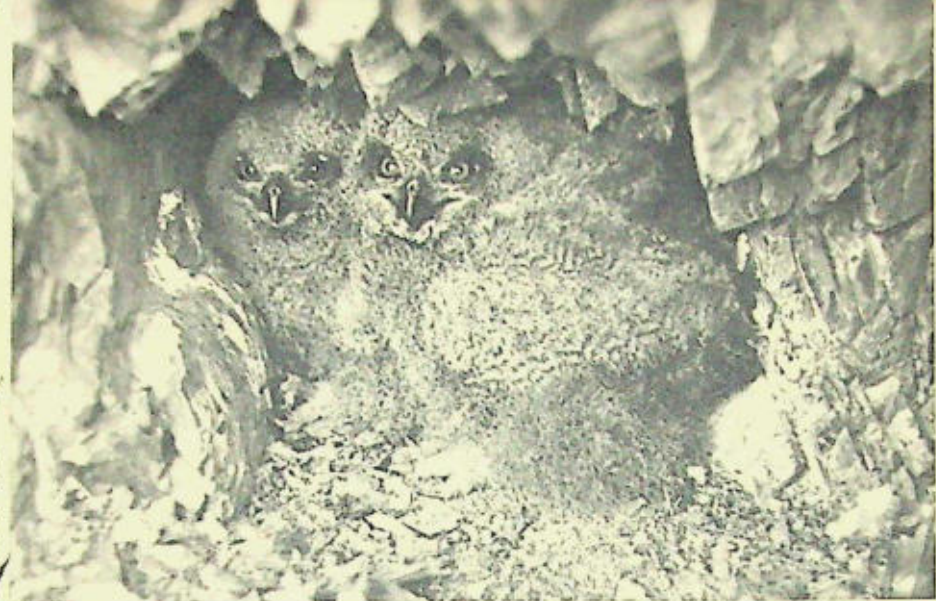




These two young eagle owls were born in this hole. The elder of the two—the one on the right—is beginning to exchange his first coat of white down for a second coat of a darker shade. It takes no more than two months for these chicks weighing no more than an ounce or so to develop into owls weighing four or five pounds. The father of these two has left a crow and a trout on the edge of the nest.

At five weeks old the young birds are covered with a coat of greyish down streaked with dark brown. They are lively and bright-eyed, and are already venturing out of the nest. As yet they do not go far: just far enough to lean against the rock face and sun themselves.

During these first outings, however, a whole brood may perish; for on these steep crags it is easy to slip, and a fall may well be fatal.



At the age of six weeks the young eagle owls have such a voracious appetite that both their parents must hunt, and even during the day. To feed their hungry family they bring back small rodents, hares or weasels. One of the parents has laid a magpie in front of the young ones and gone off again in search of a hazel hen, a black grouse or a buzzard. When the parent returns he will perch on a branch with his catch, pluck it and eat it. Perhaps he will find a hedgehog, which he will skin carefully and devour.

Despite their powerful beaks and their strong legs with the long sharp claws, and despite the fierce expression on their faces, these young ones cannot yet pluck birds, and remain dependent on their parents for food. The one on the right can probably flutter about a little, but he will not be able to fly properly until he is about two and a half months old.

The eagle owl is not a migratory bird. During the fine weather, when there is plenty of food to be had, it hides its spoils in bushes and under the snow on the mountains in order to build up a store for the winter.



Scops Owl

This little owl, no bigger than a blackbird, is fairly common in Corsica and Provence; it does not nest in the north.

At the approach of autumn it migrates to Central Africa, and comes back to Southern Europe when the fine weather returns. There it finds the beetles, the grasshoppers, the crickets and the butterflies on which it lives. It is also fond of lizards and slugs, crustaceans and small rodents.

As soon as dusk falls the male flies off, giving his low cry, 'djew-djew-djew', to range over his hunting ground, which may be a park or a cemetery, a garden or a clump of trees.

The eggs are laid at the beginning of May. The young birds leave the nest about the middle of July.



Short-eared Owl

From spring to autumn the short-eared owl lives on marshy heath land and in damp meadows. In these barren wastes, where trees are few, it nests on the ground. It is the only owl which is in the habit of building a nest—though it must be said that it does not take much trouble with either the construction or the furnishing of it.

The photographs show one nest made of rough grass, and another of rushes cut to size and heaped together.

The short-eared owl is a handsome bird rather larger than the long-eared owl. Its plumage is very light yellow, strongly mottled with warm brown and buff. Its eyes are a pale golden colour. Its legs and toes are completely covered with delicate feathers. Its ear-tufts are short and are very often lowered.

The young birds in the lower picture are not yet a week old. One of them is preening itself, scratching itself with its beak and fluffing up its feathers.

At the back of their heads the dark line shaped in an arc shows the position of the auditory cavity. When the down grows more thickly it will no longer be visible.

Even while the brood is being reared the nest is kept clean, which is exceptional among owls.





The mother is on the alert. She is looking to see where the danger is coming from and is sheltering her brood under one wing. One enterprising young bird wants to see too.



She has seen the observer. To frighten off this potential enemy she swells up her plumage, bristles her short facial feathers, and screeches angrily.

At the age of three weeks the young owls leave the nest for good. At five weeks they can fly.

The one in the photograph is about a month and a half old. In its adolescent plumage there are still a few tufts of down. Its black bill and its white moustache are enough to show that it is a young short-eared owl. It has learned to swoop on a vole, or pursue a starling or a moth in flight. Its wandering life has begun.

In winter the short-eared owls make for the coasts of the Mediterranean or for Africa. In a year when there are plenty of voles, however, many of them remain on their hunting grounds, supplementing their diet with the food which they have stored up against the winter.



In many countries there are voluntary societies for the protection of birds. They issue information to country people, form bird reserves, promote laws punishing the destruction of useful species. But the task of combating ignorance, greed and the urge to destroy is one which never ends.

Although in many countries the nocturnal birds of prey receive official protection, they are still the object of absurd suspicions.

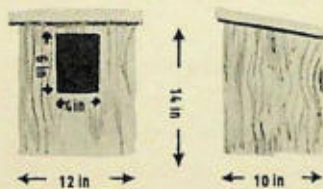
They have their enemies, even among those concerned with the protection of birds, who accuse them of destroying other birds. It is an unjust accusation, for although a tawny owl may occasionally snatch a young bird from the nest or a Tengmalm's owl kill a few robins, these are as a rule sickly or wounded birds whose fate is already sealed.

It must be said and said again that owls do a great deal of useful work for agriculture. Voles, rats, mice and field mice represent about 70 per cent of the diet of the tawny owl, 90 per cent of that of the long-eared owl, and 95 per cent of that of the barn owl.

It is worth a farmer's while to establish owls on his land, and there is no particular difficulty about doing so. The edge of a small wood, an avenue of trees, an orchard—these are all good places for putting up nesting-boxes, in which some species readily make themselves at home. The boxes should be firmly fixed in a tree, not less than ten feet from the ground, with their openings towards the east. The sketches below show the shape and size of the box which is suitable for the tawny owl. For the little owl the dimensions should be reduced by a third; for the scops owl and the pygmy owl by half.

For the barn owl it is necessary to provide a hole in the wall of a barn, shed or loft, some eight inches by twelve, so that the birds can find their way in and out. The pictures on pages 30 and 36 show internal arrangements which require only a few boards.

But it is not necessary to be concerned with gardening or agriculture to be interested in owls. If the pictures in this book have given the reader some understanding of the beauty, the majesty and the mystery of these birds, it may be hoped that he will become their defender against those who seek to destroy them.



Photographs

E. K. BARTH	..	..	12, 57, 58, 60-64, 72, 75-78, 89
R. P. BILLE	..	..	17, 54-56
J. FEUERSTEIN	..	..	73
ERIC J. HOSKING	..	..	6-9, 15, 16, 20-35, 42-46, 49, 67-70, 74, 83-87
E. SIEGRIST..	..	..	11
R. H. NOAILLES	..	..	4
C. VAUCHER	..	..	79-81
E. WEITNAUER	..	..	36-39, 47, 50, 53
G. K. YEATES	51

Audubon Society:

CRUICKSHANK	41
J. MARINUS..	13
C. J. OTT	59
L. W. WALKER	71

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78