

# Winter's when great horned owls sing nightly duets

By David Herlocker

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**A** CRISP AUTUMN chill seems to hold the pre-dawn air still. Soft gray mist hangs among the trees and settles upon spider webs strung through the grass. From the head of the canyon, where bay branches intermingle with stately live oaks, a haunting six-note serenade announces the presence of a great-horned owl; the deep sonorous voice of this male owl penetrates the surrounding

## NATURE ALMANAC

forest and proclaims ownership to all who understand this primal

language.

This particular male has been calling each night for a month, telling the nomadic juveniles and other non-territory holders that this canyon is his. On this morning, he receives an answer — a higher pitched call follows his after a delay of a few seconds. He waits, repeats his song and hears the answer again. It is the unmistakable voice of his mate. He knows this voice just as certainly as any person would know the face of a spouse — this is the female with whom he has shared this valley since he first arrived, seven years before.

This pair of owls has spent the last year coexisting at a distance; they did not breed last season. After raising two healthy young the previous year, they silently agreed to take a break. In February, when the local pair of red-tailed hawks started to add material to the nest that the owls had used (which was originally built by the red-tails) the owls didn't interfere. Now, as November slips into December, the owls begin a tentative process of reacquaintance, each saying to the

other "I hear you, I am still here, and this is still our place".

Each night, the two great birds call in a ritualized duet. This singing serves to tell all other great horned owls that this is an occupied territory, and it strengthens the bond between the two. By the end of December, the male begins to call from a perch close to the nest, as if to coax his mate into focusing on this special location, a suggestion that she consider raising another family this spring.

When the female flies in to a branch near the male, just the sight of her excites him. This is the closest they have been for more than a year. He responds by giving a series of low, tremulous hoots. When the female answers, he excitedly begins to puff out the bright bib of white feathers on his upper chest, he bobs his head and bows low. The female mimics these postures and calls, which prompts the male to fly over to her and begin grooming the feathers of her head and neck.

After several bouts of this calling, bowing and preening, the female flies to a lower perch. The male glides gently onto her lowered back, and with his powerful talons curled to avoid scratching her, he balances delicately for the moment it takes to consummate this nuptial display. For the next few weeks, these great birds start their evening's activities with this romantic performance. Near the end of January, the first egg is laid.

By mid-February the female sits atop three perfect eggs. Her mate provides her with ample prey that he delivers directly to her. During the day and in the middle of the night he perches near the nest, ready to fend off intruders, or to sit on top of the



Provided by Len Blumin

**CAMOUFLAGE:** Great horned owls blend into their environment to remain hidden during daylight hours.

eggs if his mate should leave her post. This is the pattern for a month.

In mid-March, just as the local rodent populations begin to explode, the first egg hatches. The newly hatched owlet, blind, pink and completely helpless, bears no resemblance to the massive female with her intense gold eyes, powerful build and formidable weaponry. She gently removes tiny pieces of flesh from a freshly killed vole, and offers these succulent morsels to the gaping beak of the chick, which eats until slumping into a satiated stupor. Three days later, the first chick has nearly doubled in size when the second egg hatches. Now the mother owl splits her attention between the two chicks, but her mate is an accomplished hunter, and he delivers plenty of food to satisfy the growing family. Two days later, the third egg hatches.

A week of stormy weather makes it difficult for the male to detect prey, and there are several nights during which he hunts unsuccessfully. When he does bring food to the nest, the two larger chicks are still begging for more when the last pieces are offered. The third chick, still nourished by the reserves in its yolk sac, stays alive. But after nine days, he is too weak to raise his head. By April he is gone.

Fine spring weather finds the

young owls growing and changing every day. Their white down gives way to shades of brown and gray, their bright yellow eyes and protruding, hooked beaks already resemble those of their parents. By the end of May, the nest is barely capable of holding the two birds, they now perch on nearby branches and spend much time stretching and flapping their wings. Every evening, well before darkness, the chicks respond to their gnawing appetites by issuing a series of harsh, hissing screams. These begging calls persist throughout the evening as the young birds hop around the nest tree waiting for the parents to return with freshly killed food.

All summer, the adults share captured prey with the young owls that fly from perch to perch, shrieking incessantly as the parents concentrate on watching and listening for prey. During this process, the young birds slowly learn to hunt by observation. Sometime in autumn, the parents stop feeding the young. The newly independent owls are forced to fly out into an unknown sky in search of a sheltered forest hideaway where they can take up a life of their own.

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