

BARN OWL

OUT

There is not a tumble-down barn in the country, that does not shelter good material for a naturalist's note-book. Take it all in all, the oldest shacks are the most productive. If they are not bored full of flicker holes, you will find swallows nesting in the eaves. If there is a hole and a snug corner some wren or bluebird has likely climbed in and built a home. If it be near town, some English sparrow has perhaps been living there all winter, and at the first indication of Spring has begun carrying in grass and sticks.

1 \*

Years ago, our nearest neighbor got a pair of pigeons, sawed two holes up in the corner of his barn and nailed up a soap box. The pigeons disappeared one day and the next Spring a pair of barn owls moved in. That was seven or eight years ago, but the old dusty box in the gable is still rented to the same pair. I have no doubt the tenants will remain as long as the barn lasts.

2 \*

Now, the barn owl is a queer looking tenant. No one is particularly fond of <sup>an</sup> owl. More than that, his actions are against him. Its natural that we havent much sympathy for a fellow, who is up and sneaking around all night and sleeping through the day. There is always some suspicion attached to a night prowler, whether he be bird, man or beast. However, I often watched the barn owl and studied his habits, I am satisfied he paid our neighbor more in one night than the pigeons,

(swallows and wrens) did in a month. (Not in singing, mercy no! Whoever heard a song coming from a hooked bill? But in real service about the farm, the service of a watchman or policeman to rid the place of injurious rodents.

It was not an easy matter to picture these barn owls, situated as they were in the very peak of the old barn. (The minute we approached the nest-box, the old owl pitched headlong out the hole and landed in the willow tree opposite.) We had to climb a ladder and swing into the rafters to reach the nest. From such a position we could hardly handle a camera. There was not even a loft to work from, so we secured a long ladder, and nailed a couple of cross-pieces strong enough to hold a board. Crawling up in a stooped position, we took the back out of the nest-box and arranged it so it would drop down and show the interior, or could be fastened up at will.

A month later, we crawled up in the gable-end of the barn, and pulled out three of the funniest, fuzziest, monkey-faced little brats that it has ever been my privilege to set eyes upon. They blinked, snapped their bills and hissed like a box-full of snakes. We took them to the ground and doubled up in laughter at their queer antics. They bobbed and screwed around in more funny attitudes in a minute than any contortionist I ever saw.

We found them graded in size and height as carefully as a carpenter builds the steps of a stair-case. They were the

lumpiest looking birds I ever saw. It looked like some amateur taxidermist had taken them in hand and rammed the cotton in, wad at a time with a stick, till he had the youngsters bulging out in knobs all over.

6 \* The eldest, we called the colonel, but looking at him from a humanized standpoint, it seemed to me, he had been put together wrong, for his chest had slipped clear around on his back. At times, he was a peacable looking citizen, but he was always wary and suspicious. He turned his back on the camera in disgust or sat in a soured state of silence, but one eye was always open and watching every movement we made.

7 \* We crept out one night and hid in a brush heap by the barn. It was not long before the scratching and soft hissing of the owls told us their breakfast time had come. The curtain of the night had fallen. The day creatures were at rest. Suddenly, a shadow flared across the dim-lit sky; a soundless sweeping of wings as the shadow winnowed back again. The young owls, by some unmistakable preception, knew of the approach of food, for there was a sudden out-burst in the soap-box like the whistle of escaping steam. It was answered by an unearthly, rasping, witching screech. Again and again, the shadow came and went.

8 \* Then, I crept into the barn, felt my way up and edged along the rafters to the hen-roosty old box. Silently, I waited (and listened) to a nasal concert that was as pleasing as a cage full of

musical snakes.) The minute food was brought, I flashed a match and saw one of the little "monkey-faces" tearing the head from the body of a young gopher.

The next time, I climbed the cob-webbed rafters to photograph the young owls, I cautiously thrust in my hand to pull out the nearest nestling. In a twinkling, he fell flat on his back and clutched me with both claws. Of all the grips I ever felt, that was most like a needle-toothed steel-trap. I felt the twinge of pain as the sharp talons sank into the flesh. I cringed and the grip tightened. The slightest movement was the signal for a tenser grasp. It was the clutch that fastens in the prey and never relaxes till the stillness of death follows. I hung to the rafters and gritted my teeth till I could wedge in my thumb and pry the claws loose.

9 \*  
OUT The young owls were hardly old enough to fly, but they could raise their wings and run like a cat for the darkest corner. We had never tried the camera on such a ferocious lot of birds. They knew the art of self-defense like a professional prize fighter. Approach one, and he was on his guard. He would turn on his back in an inkling and throw up those claws. "Come on! I'm ready," he seemed to say, and we kept our distance.

10 \*  
The oldest one had a villainous temper he was as much opposed to having his picture taken as a superstitious Indian. Generally, he sat with his chin resting on his chest, like a

broken down lawyer. [Once when the photographer was least expecting it, he dropped on his trowser's leg as lightly as a feather, but with a strength and tenacity of a mad bull pup. The claws sank through to bed-rock, and before they could be pried loose, they had drawn blood in three places.

OUT

DONT GET THE IMPRESSION

But the young owls were ~~not~~ always in such a savage mood. They may greet strangers in a ferocious manner, especially when disturbed while they are asleep during the day. If left alone by themselves, they <sup>WERE</sup> ~~seem to be~~ as tame <sup>AND AMIABLE</sup> as pet pussies.

11 X

It is well known to ornithologists, that all birds of prey swallow a good deal of indigestible matter, such as hair, bone and feathers of rodents and birds. This is formed into balls in the stomach and vomited up. By examination of these pellets, scientists are able to tell exactly what the hawks and owls live on.

~~YOU ARE LIKELY MORE FAMILIAR THAN I WITH~~

A pair of barn owls occupied one of the towers of the Smithsonian Institut<sup>ION</sup> at Washington. When the young were half grown the floor was strewn with pellets. An examination of two hundred of these showed a total of four hundred and fifty-four skulls. Four hundred and twelve of these were mice, twenty rats, twenty shrews, one mole and one vesper sparrow.

A family of young barn owls will number from three to seven birds. It is incredible what an amount of vermin a family of owls will consume. An old owl will capture as much

EXP 12 \*  
ANOTHER  
photo of  
Charming  
ATMOSPHERE

13 \*  
or more food than a dozen cats in a night. The owlets are always hungry; they will eat their own weight in food every night, and more if they can get it. A case is on record where a half-grown owl was given all the mice it could eat. It swallowed eight in rapid succession. The ninth followed all but the tail, which which for some time hung out of the birds mouth. The rapid digestion of the raptores is shown by the fact that in three hours the little glutton was ready for a second meal and swallowed four additional mice. If this is the performance of a single bird, the effect that a whole nest full of owls would have on the vermin of a community is self evident.

14 \*  
I wondered at the changes in the owl faces as they grew older. When I first saw them in white down, I thought the faces was that of a sheep, and then a monkey, and then I didn't know just what it resembled. The third time we visited the nest, each youngster had a face that surely looked like some old granny I have seen dressed in a night dap. Later on, when we saw them full-frown, they got to be more owl-like and dignified.

15 \*  
16 \*  
17 \*  
An owl spreads terror among the small ground folk, as a ghost among negroes. It is the owl's shadow-silent wings, his sharpest sound-catching ear, and his night-piercing eyes that make him the superior of the mouse, the mole, the gopher and the squirrel. He fans over the field with an ominous screech that sets a mouse scampering to his hole, but his ear has caught the

footstep, those wings are swift, those steel-trap claws always ready; his drop if sure, his grip is death.

18 \* From an economic standpoint, it would be difficult to point out a more useful bird in any farming community. Like many other birds, the barn owl deserves the fullest protection. Man is <sup>OFTEN</sup> ~~usually~~ its worst enemy.

The large birds of prey generally nest in places more difficult to photograph than the smaller birds, yet <sup>such</sup> ~~such~~ photographs of the smaller birds are so difficult to get completely on account of the diminutive size of the subjects.