



Sea Trail Owl Nest



Sea Trail owlets surrounded
by feathers and plumes of
a Snowy Egret meal

Brunswick Wildlife The GHOW Show!

Every year around this time, GHOW's (the official abbreviation for Great Horned Owls) put on a big show. These owls are "stealth masters" that hunt at night on wings muffled by design...but some are usually discovered in Brunswick County, treating local neighbors, birders, and photographers to a super show of nature in progress!

This year Sea Trail is leading in the number of reports. Resident Joe Lafferty reported the GHOW's to Carolinabirds, the Carolinas' hotline for important bird sightings, and sent photos to the Carolina Bird Club. The most interesting part...as many quickly identified was the meal that had been served....a Snowy Egret. At first, Joe had trouble seeing the owlets due to the white egret feathers that practically covered the nest together with a set of very long legs. Now that was a meal!

GHOW's, commonly known as "hoot owls" are found across a very wide range in North America, Mexico, and portions of Central and South America...in deserts, grasslands, forests, suburban, and other ecosystems that are below arctic and alpine tree lines. These owls are fairly common but widespread since they require large territories.

Great Horned Owls do not build nests and prefer to take over Red-tailed Hawk nests or other nests since the owls breeds earlier than many species. GHOW's will also use ledges and other platforms that fit.

Eggs are generally laid in late December and January. There are normally two eggs in the clutch and the incubation period is around thirty-three days.

Males bring food for females while the females incubate their clutch. After hatching, while females are in the nest with nestlings, males make several trips a night to feed all. Once the owlets are able to regulate their own temperature, the mother is also free to hunt.

As an adult returns with prey, owlets emit a short screech approximately every thirty seconds, like a locator beacon. The adult flying in sounds a short, soft "whoooo" and the little ones go wild! They screech and flap their wings...like the begging behavior typical of backyard songbirds.

GHOW's are nocturnal perch-and-pounce hunters...with large eyes equipped for night vision and keen hearing assisted by facial disc-feathers that direct sound into their ears. Add in their silent flight and you have one of nature's most efficient hunters

They have the broadest diet of all North American owls, even preying on other owl species. Its grocery list might include a tasty selection of snakes, frogs, scorpions, small rodents, insects, rabbits, ducks, geese, and wading birds.

GHOW eggs are laid asynchronously (a day or two apart) so the youngest is a day or two younger, somewhat smaller, and will stay in the nest longer. In the Sea Trail photo, the owlet in front is the oldest and should be expected it to glide to the ground this week.

Once on the ground, it will be able to fly short distances, be fiercely protected by both parents, and be fed by both parents for months. Of course, no one should approach it or try to feed it. Most likely the parents will lead it to deep brambles for cover during daylight. Ditto for the youngest when it also fledges.

The youngest looks well fed so the parents are experienced hunters (i.e. the egret). If you know the owlet locations, you may see the adults come in about daybreak with the last delivery of the day. An awesome experience!

After the oldest fledges, the parents will make separate deliveries continuing to feed the one in the nest and locating the other on the ground. Within a week or so of both fledging, you may get to see all four buzzing around the area at daybreak.

For a couple of years, the Ft. Fisher ferry hosted a well-publicized show. In 2007, GHOW's unsuccessfully tried to nest on a hidden, sandy platform at the top of pilings of the ferry landing. As the ferry cradled into the pilings she would leave, sometimes returning again before the ferry departed, and then leave again for ferry departure. Ferry employees and passengers really enjoyed the action.

The mother laid only one egg. Though she became more tolerant of the ferry's comings and goings, the egg eventually proved nonviable, probably due to all of the interruptions in incubation. I believe she was young and it was her first attempt to breed. Last year, however, the now experienced female tried again at the same location and produced two fledglings!

At Ocean Isle Beach in 2007, I took a sequence of GHOW nesting photos over a period of two weeks showing the owlet's rapid growth. Unfortunately, I never got to photograph that little one after it went to the ground. It spent most of the time in a large thicket.

I watched the adults bring in rabbits early in the morning but could never locate the exact spot. One day, it walked into the backyard of neighbors who called me; however, by the time I could drive down, it was safely back in the thicket.

If the adults are inexperienced hunters, the youngest may perish. Also, one may be accidentally killed. Unfortunately, the sibling of the Ocean Isle nestling died after falling from the Ocean Isle tree. It could have been either owlet...just note that the second egg is nature's backup plan.

What are the secret ingredients for hosting a show? If you live near a stand of tall pine trees along a field or golf course, you too may be treated to an owl experience. Having many squirrels, a Red-tailed Hawk favorite, will attract hawks that build nests, setting the stage for home invasions by owls.

Listen for the duet performed during courting. Sometimes the pair may be seen hooting at each other from a distance, leaning over into each hoot! This courtship duet usually begins a month or two before the eggs are laid.

If you locate an owl nest, search underneath for pellets regurgitated by the owls...pellets containing the indigestible bones, feathers, and fur of prey.

Then as the breeding season progresses, watch for food deliveries by the male, listen for the contact and arrival calls, and enjoy the other events as they unfold.

John Ennis



The mother would leave her nest at the last moment just as the ferry cradled into its piling bumpers



The OIB owlet glided to the ground the night after it finished destroying the nest and started walking the limbs



OIB 2007



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