

# The Barn Owl (*Strix pratincola*) in Chester County, Pennsylvania

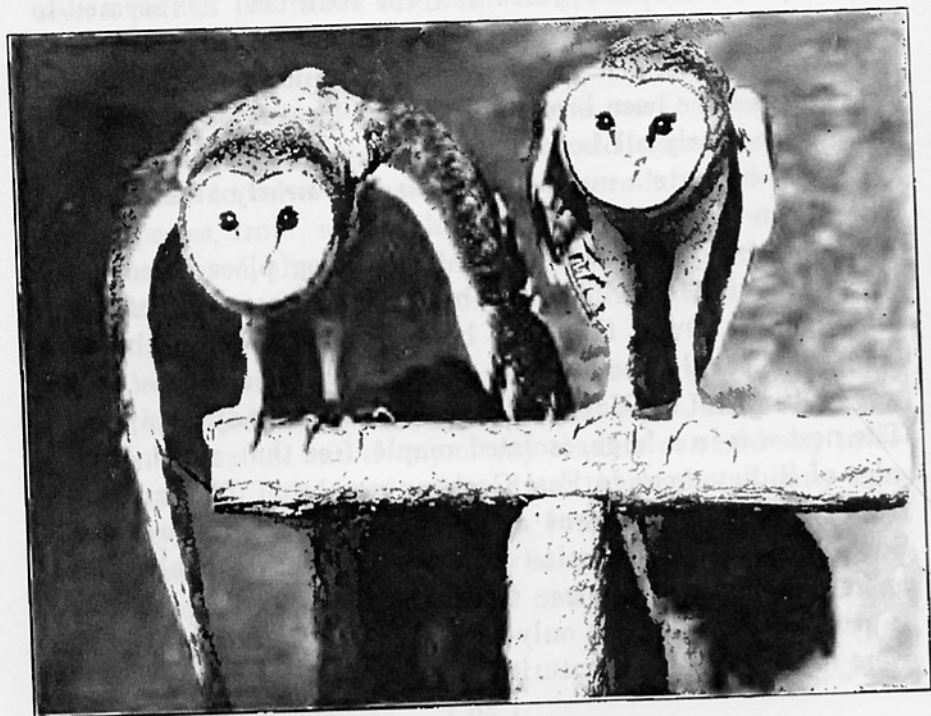
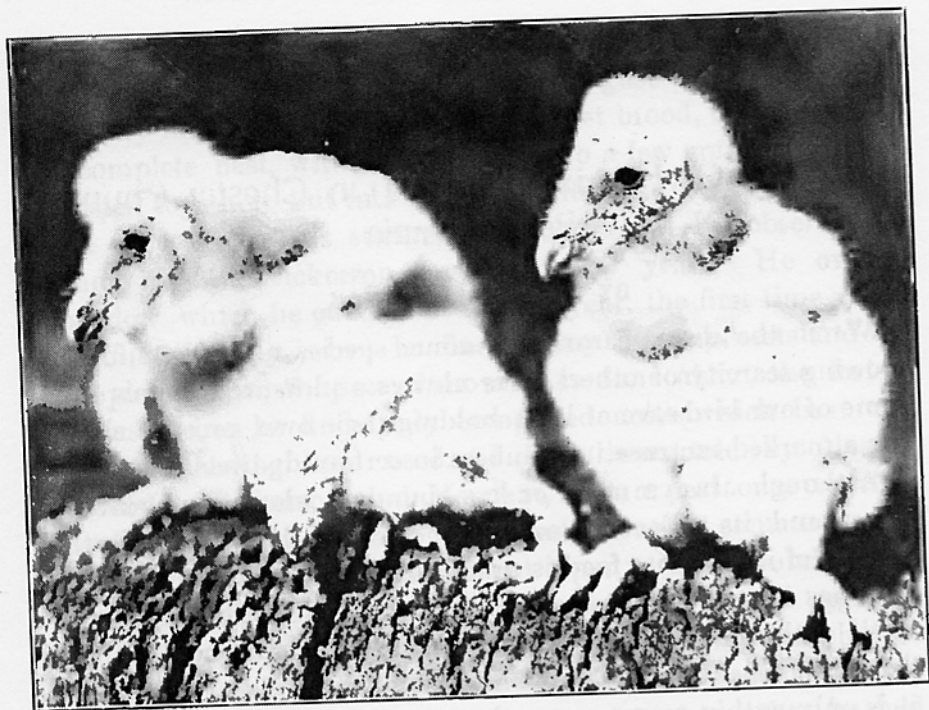
BY THOMAS H. JACKSON

With the disappearance of some species of birds, and the growing scarcity of others, it is always a pleasure to know that some of our birds are at least holding their own, or even showing a marked increase in numbers in certain districts.

Although always more or less abundant along the Delaware River and its adjacent low-lying meadow lands, where the supply of its favorite food is practically inexhaustible, the Barn Owl has always been considered a *rara avis* in Chester county until within a comparatively recent period. Since 1870, the writer has paid considerable attention to our local birds, and it is only within recent years that the Barn Owl has seemed to occupy a place amongst our regular summer residents.

Within the last ten years a constantly increasing number of these birds have been brought in to our local taxidermists, and these have nearly all been young birds. The late Henry Garrett received quite a number of them, and nearly all came from Willistown township.

All efforts to trace these birds to a nesting place failed, until the spring of 1902, when, after hearing the description of a curious "White Owl" that had been found in a nest the year before, I located a female Barn Owl sitting on six eggs. This was on the 15th of May, and one egg was already "pipped." The nest was in a large, isolated maple tree that stood on the edge of Ridley creek in East Goshen township. The cavity was a very roomy one and was about twenty feet from the ground. Sometime during incubation the male bird was probably killed, as he was found dead near the nest. Possibly this accounted in part for the fact that only two birds out of the six eggs that were hatched reached maturity.



YOUNG BARN OWLS.  
THREE WEEKS AND FOUR MONTHS OLD.

About the same date I visited a large, partly dead chestnut tree in East Whiteland township, where I learned a pair of Barn Owls had nested for a number of years, the secret being very closely guarded, and a portion of the brood being taken each season and sold or mounted. This particular year they did not nest there, the cavity being occupied by a pair of Sparrow Hawks.

This tree was an immense chestnut that stood in the middle of a large field. It had decayed and the center had been burned out until it remained a mere shell, while a large, hollow limb made an ideal home for the Owls.

During the summer of 1903, a brood of six Barn Owls was raised in East Bradford township. This nest was also in a large, isolated chestnut tree on a hill. The young birds were said to be quite tame, and someone fancying that Owls were only made to be shot at, killed the whole brood.

Early in May of the present year, another nest with six eggs was found in Westtown township, one mile south of West Chester. This nest was also in a large chestnut tree, standing alone in a field. A pair of Sparrow Hawks shared possession of the tree with the Owls.

All of the young were raised, two of them were in my possession for about three months and they made very interesting pets, though they never became at all tame, or allowed themselves to be handled without biting or striking with their claws. During the day they huddled together in the darkest corner of the cage, with eyes nearly closed and in a crouching position, and when disturbed would shake their heads in a most doleful manner. The only noise they made was a shrill cry that sounded like scraping ice with a knife. Rats and mice were their favorite food, though fresh meat of any kind was acceptable.

Early in December, 1904, a young Barn Owl was found dead under a large poplar tree in Willistown township. It was still partly covered with down and could not have been over eight weeks old, so that it must have been hatched about the first of October. This would seem in a measure to confirm some of the accounts we have had of the irregular nesting habits of these birds. The nest from which this bird had fallen was in a hollow limb near the top of the tree.

It seems very likely that the Barn Owl nests in this vicinity much more abundantly than has been supposed. The habit they have of hiding so thoroughly during the daytime and coming out only after dark, accounts for their being so rarely seen, and those that are captured are generally young birds, that have become lost or have not yet found secure places of concealment.

If the law against killing these birds would only be respected, it would seem that they ought to become in a short time one of our most abundant Owls. Always locating their homes in the midst of meadows or open fields, where mice are abundant and convenient, they wage incessant warfare against these pests.