

SUNBATHING BEHAVIOR OF SCREECH OWLS

By Betty Knorr

A number of ornithologists have thought that owls in the wild probably enjoy an occasional sunbath. Some owls in captivity, however, will even resort to artificial sunbaths. My two pet Screech Owls are now seven years old and their sunbathing antics could put most Robins to shame!

Here in our more spacious new location they now get real sunshine for their sunbaths but the photos taken when they were in their first year depict them taking an artificial sunbath with an ordinary incandescent table lamp.

Five years ago they discovered the joy of specialized fluorescent Gro-lux lamps. My hobby is propagating rare native wildflowers which are donated to public preserves and I purchased a number of Gro-lux lamps for this purpose. It soon became impossible to keep the owls from trotting all over the plants as they were determined to stretch out under the Gro-lux tubes.

After the owls discovered the Gro-lux lamps the old table lamp was completely ignored. I had a thousand seedlings of rare Pine Barren gentians growing under these lamps and after the owls ruined many of these plants I had to figure out a way to salvage the rest of the seedlings. When some of the most respected botanists and horticulturists told me that no one had ever successfully propagated the rare Pine Barren gentian and that the species was on the brink of extinction here in New Jersey, I just wasn't going to be defeated by two sassy Screech Owls.

Building a cage around the propagating lamps only resulted in tattered feathers for the owls as they were still determined to get under the lamps. Out of desperation we finally purchased an additional Gro-lux lamp for the owls. Fortunately this kept the owls happy and the remaining gentians survived, many of which are now growing in protected sanctuaries.

Although I have had other species of owls (injured, ailing or orphaned) they were not kept long enough to observe any real interest in sunbathing. I currently have an orphaned Great Horned Owl baby which I'll watch closely for any sunbathing behavior. I'd appreciate hearing from any other banders who have seen owls sunbathing actively and deliberately either in the wild or in captivity.

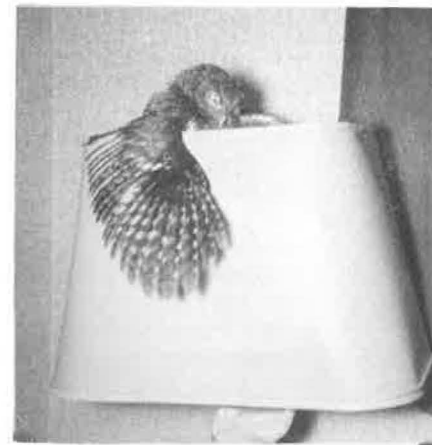
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(1) "Hey Squeaky, I think maybe we can get a sunbath with this lamp!"



(2) "Do you really think so, Elmer?"



(3) "Yeh Squeaky, come try it. It feels great!"



(4) "Like this, Elmer?"



(5) "No, Squeaky, you gotta really throw yourself into it!"



(6) "Come on, I'll show you how!"



(7) "Yeh, Elmer, thish is great stuff! Hic!!!"



(8) "Gee, Ma, we didn't hurt the lamp. We only wanted a sun-bath!"