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BREEDING IN THE WILD BY A HAND-RAISED SCREECH OWL

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On 2 May 1975 I received a five to six week-old grey phase Screech Owl (*Otus asio*) which was found in Tampa, Hillsborough County, Florida, and placed it in my large screened porch with a perch provided in the corner farthest from human traffic. The porch overlooks a thickly wooded yard where numerous native trees and shrubs grow to within a meter of the house. In preparation for its release we avoided taming the owl and approached it only for feeding. It was hand fed until it was old enough to take food left for it.

On 1 August the owl, which had not been banded, was put in a nest box designed for Screech Owls and given a dead mouse. The box was 4 m high in a tree 6 m from the porch and only 10 m from the corner of the porch where the owl's perch was. The owl disappeared the same day and was not seen again in 1975.

On 15 March 1976 I saw a red phase Screech Owl in a tree near the nest box, and on 25 March a grey phase Screech Owl was in a small tree less than 2 m from the porch and only 3 m from the corner where the captive owl's perch had been. The grey owl returned to this tree each morning at dawn and remained there until dark. It appeared undisturbed by the normal household noises and activities, and, when we went to look at it, often showed no awareness of our presence. The red owl stayed in the nest box during the day and was seen elsewhere only once. About noon on 31 March, a hot day, it joined the grey owl in the tree. It appeared nervous—tensing and preparing for flight—at sounds from the house and finally returned to the nest box at 1500 hours. It was not seen in the tree again.

I did not visit the nest box during this time because it might have caused desertion (Van Camp and Henny 1975, N. Amer. Fauna, No. 71, p. 7). On 16 April, after incubation was underway, there were three eggs in the nest box.

During the incubation and nestling period the grey owl (now assumed to be a male) continued to spend the days in the tree and the incubating red owl (now assumed to be its mate) remained in the nest box. I checked the box every two or three days during incubation and after hatching. Contrary to the findings of Van Camp and Henny (1975) these visits caused no distress, even

though I occasionally handled the incubating female. The male owl watched but never seemed alarmed. The female usually was in a sluggish state. Even when she and the young were removed for banding, she was not fully alert. Only two eggs hatched. The contents of the third seemed solidified and the egg was removed on 30 April. The nest was empty on 25 May. Fledging probably occurred on 24 May. At dusk on 27 May the adults were seen feeding the two young in the trees. When I approached one of the young closely an adult repeatedly gave a harsh three-note whistle and finally flew at my head. I left to avoid driving them from the safety of our yard.

Although the Screech Owl frequently nests close to residences (Bent 1938, U. S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 170:246) this nesting seems to be unusually close. The yard contained other nest boxes farther from the house, as well as some natural cavities. This nest box was the one from which we released the owl we raised. Furthermore, there were numerous trees offering shade and shelter in which the male owl could have spent the day, but he chose the tree closest to the porch corner that had held the owl's perch. These two site selections as well as the male owl's seemingly relaxed behavior in close proximity to human activity and noise, suggest that this male owl was the same bird that had been raised on the porch, and that it had returned with its mate to nest.

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