

## GRAIN ELEVATOR SUPPORTS WINTER BARN OWL NEST

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Nesting Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) have been documented within the United States for every month of the year (Otteni et al. 1972, Marti 1991). In Mississippi, I have found Barn Owls nesting in the central and eastern portions of the state throughout the year, although they show a peak in egg-laying during January and February. These regions are relatively diverse in habitat, with mixed pine (*Pinus* spp.) and hardwood stands, pasture, and croplands. Although most Barn Owl nests have been located in areas rich in croplands, there are other prey-supporting habitats available during the periods when fields are bare.

In west Mississippi, in the Delta region, available habitat is almost exclusively cropland, and I have found nesting efforts to be much more seasonal. Egg-laying occurs almost exclusively within the December to February period. These are often the harshest months in Mississippi, but these nests usually produce fledglings in March, April, and May, when crops begin to flourish and prey abound. Late fall and winter offer little more than barren fields, and I have found only one Barn Owl nest initiated just prior to that period.

This nest was located at "Big River Seed Company," a grain elevator in Cleveland, Bolivar County, Mississippi. The clutch of five eggs was laid in a small room at the top of the complex, above the silos. Egg-laying began in early October 1991, and I saw three fledglings there on several occasions during January 1992. Although the elevator is located within the city limits of Cleveland, hundreds of acres of cropland are readily accessible to the birds for late spring and summer foraging. During winter, however, these lands are barren. Pellets at the site suggested that the owls were feeding almost exclusively on sparrows (Emberizinae) and blackbirds (Icterinae). House mice (*Mus musculus*) also occasionally occurred as prey.

Various sparrows and blackbirds were abundant among the spilled grains within the site, and I suspect that house mice were also plentiful. It appears that while other Barn Owls were leaving the area for the winter, this pair took advantage of the elevator and its associated readily attainable prey. Barn Owls again successfully nested at this site during the winter of 1992-93.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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- Otteni, L.C., E.G. Bolen, and C. Cottam. 1972. Predator-prey relationships and reproduction of the Barn Owl in southern Texas. Wilson Bull. 84:434-438.