

GREAT HORNED OWLS NEST ON BRIDGE

On Monday, 1 May 2000, Richard Kotecki and Paul Leavens were inspecting the Route 5 bridge over Eighteen Mile Creek between the Towns of Evans and Hamburg in Erie County, New York, when they flushed a large bird from the top of the concrete arch beneath the deck. They noticed that another bird still remained on top of the arch and believed it to be a baby owl. Knowing of my interest in birds, they snapped a photograph. The photograph, accompanying this note, clearly shows a young Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) with wings still not developed enough for flight.

Since I could not recall ever having seen or heard about this species nesting on man-made structures, I did a search of the literature. The sources reviewed (Bull 1974, Eaton 1988, Kaufman 1996) stated that Great Horned Owls typically use the nests of other species, such as hawks, eagles, crows, ravens, or herons. They may also use an old squirrel's nest, a natural tree cavity, a broken-off tree stump, a cliff ledge, a cave, or they may nest in logs or among rocks on the ground.

Other references revealed numerous instances of Great Horned Owls nesting on man-made structures. These included artificial nest platforms built for them in trees (Scott 1970), nest baskets and nest tires placed on poles or in trees (Houston et al, 1998), farm and mine buildings (Peck and James 1983), and hay barracks (Bent 1961). Two of the most unusual nest sites recorded include



Fledgling Great Horned Owl on Bridge Nest.
Kotecki & Leavens

for them in trees (Scott 1970), nest baskets and nest tires placed on poles or in trees (Houston et al, 1998), farm and mine buildings (Peck and James 1983), and hay barracks (Bent 1961). Two of the most unusual nest sites recorded include prehistoric ruins and a large flowerpot on the floor of the deck of a third story city apartment house in Lawrence, Kansas (Houston et al, 1998). Lastly, Houston also cites one record of this species nesting on a beam beneath a railroad bridge (original reference: Bendire 1892).

The type of bridge where the Erie County Great Horned Owl was found is known as a concrete open-spandrel arch and it spans the steep gorge of Eighteen Mile Creek. The specific site chosen by the owls was near the crown of the arch, the only area where it is nearly flat. The arch is about five feet wide with the length between columns where the nest was located being about five and a-half feet. The site rather simulates a cave except there is no rear wall and thus it is more precarious. It is quite remote, high above the creek below and inaccessible to all but flying creatures. The bridge inspectors were using the "Under Bridge Inspection Unit", a special truck with a bucket and long arms for extending out from the top of the bridge, down, then back underneath the bridge.

In summary, Great Horned Owls utilize an extraordinarily wide range of nest sites. However, I could find only one previous record of the species using a bridge.

The Erie County nest site seems like a fine choice for the owls and it is surprising to me that bridges have not been recorded as nest sites more often.

I wish to thank my co-workers, Richard Kotecki and Paul Leavens, for relating their experience to me and for alertly taking the photograph. A special thanks to Audrey Horbett, Ron Tozer, and Ron Pittaway for researching their libraries on my behalf.

LITERATURE CITED

Bendire, C.E. 1892. Life histories of North American birds with special reference to their breeding habits and eggs. *Smithson. Contr. Knowledge* 28: 376-389.

Bull, John. 1974. *Birds of New York State*. Doubleday/Natural History Press. Garden City, NY. [Reprinted by Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY. 1985.]

Eaton, Steven W. 1988. Great Horned Owl. In *The atlas of breeding birds of New York State*. R. F. Andrle and J. R. Carroll, editors. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY.

Everett, Michael. 1977. *A natural history of owls*. Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited. London, England.

Houston, C.S., D.G. Smith, and C. Rohner. 1998. Great Horned Owl. In *The Birds of North America*, No. 372. A. Poole and F. Gill, editors. Cornell Lab. of Ornithology and The Academy of Natural Sciences.

Kaufman, Kenn. 1996. *Lives of North American birds*. Houghton Mifflin. Boston, MA.

Peck and James. 1983. *Breeding birds of Ontario nidiology and distribution; volume 1: nonpasserines*. Royal Ontario Museum. Toronto, Ontario.

Scott, F. R. 1970. Middle Atlantic coast region. *Audubon Field Notes* 24:669.

Willie D'Anna 2257 Cayuga Drive Extension, Niagara Falls, NY 14304

