

BIRD EXPLORER

Wild owls and sustainable agriculture

BY PETER J. THIEMANN



Peter J. Thiemann

This is a story about a very special owl family that raised its young on a ranch high up in the mountains a little east of Ashland. I knew about Great Gray Owls (GGOs) from sightings in Applegate during the summer of 2012, then during 2013, and again this spring. I documented the lives of several families at Howard Prairie Lake in the Cascade Mountains.

Late this nesting season came a call from Klamath Bird Observatory president Harry Fuller, who was notified that the owners of Willow-Witt Ranch near Grizzly Peak had located an active GGO nest with two young owlets on their property. The owlets appeared to be only one to two weeks old in June and could be seen with the female owl in a very small old nest, probably a raven's. Owls don't build their own nests and rely on used hawk or raven nests or sometimes broken-off tree snags.

Willow-Witt Ranch is a certified sustainable goat ranch that offers farm stays in a B&B, camping, birding and special events. This GGO nest was in the campground not far from ranch buildings. This species normally nests in remote mountain areas far from civilization, so

this was pretty amazing!

Harry and I visited shortly after the phone call and found a very peaceful setting with the female GGO brooding her two young. We could see that the old raven nest was much too small with little space for the growing owl family. For a week we monitored the nest as both adults were caring for the young and the male also doing all the hunting for meadow voles. He would bring the prey and give it to the female, who then would feed their young. I had hoped that we could observe another GGO nesting success as I had seen the previous two years at Howard Prairie, but I was wrong. Soon, one owlet disappeared. Maybe it fell out of the nest or was kicked out. Strangely it was the older, larger owlet that was lost. Anyway, we never saw it again.

Then we heard a report that the remaining owlet had jumped from the nest and was down on the forest floor. It is normal for young owls to leave the nest before they can fly. Then they crawl back up a tree snag and learn to fly. But this owlet was very young and could not get back up. This is the most vulnerable time for young owls as predators may

find them on the forest floor. The mom owl was there to guard the little guy as I visited the next day. Although it appeared the owlet was nearby, I could not locate it. The female GGO was sitting low on a tree branch and—a first time ever for me—I was dive-bombed by her—directly over my head! I'm glad I was wearing my hat. It was a clear message to stay away—the owlet was probably still on the ground nearby. So I left and the owl family was never seen again, not by the ranch owners or anyone. We will never know what happened, but hopefully the female GGO was able to move the owlet into the protection of the forest and eventually coax it to safety on some tree. What we do know is that the owls at Willow-Witt Ranch need our help.

The two GGO nesting successes at Howard Prairie Lake that I observed in 2013-14 were in nesting platforms installed by a landowner. Earlier this year I initiated a project to install more nesting platforms, with one completed in March at Little Hyatt Lake. Building on that success, and seeing the need at Willow-Witt, we have now organized a much larger effort, with Rogue Valley Audubon Society (RVAS) handling the donation paperwork.

Two platforms for Willow-Witt are in the planning stages with more to be located on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. Donations are coming in and the future of GGOs at Willow-Witt looks bright—research from northeast Oregon, Canada and Finland has shown that this owl species will readily accept nesting platforms. We will destroy what is left of the old raven nest at Willow-Witt in order to discourage the owls from returning next year.

In the Applegate we will research the Ferris Gulch area for a nesting platform location on BLM land. Anyone interested in supporting these projects can send a donation to Rogue Valley Audubon Society, GGO Conservation Fund, PO Box 8597, Medford, OR 97501. All birders and others are encouraged to visit Willow-Witt Ranch at the base of Grizzly Peak off Shale City Road, a half hour east of Ashland.

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Female Great Gray Owl at Willow-Witt Ranch near Grizzly Peak.



Nesting platform with female Great Gray Owl and her young at Howard Prairie.



Great Gray owlet on snag before learning to fly at Howard Prairie.



Female Great Gray Owl with two young in raven nest at Willow-Witt.

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