

*For over three months, Rio Grande Nature Center volunteer Scott Jordan has monitored developments in a great horned owl nest, nearby in the Rio Grande bosque. Here's his 2011 journal:*

## Babes in the Woods:

### Great Horned Owls Nest Again

By Scott W. Jordan

Last year, a pair of great horned owls nested in the Rio Grande bosque and raised two young. One owlet, who fell from a limb near the nest when not yet capable of independent living, was recovered by a volunteer, placed with a surrogate parent, and later released into the wild when fully grown. The good news: Most likely, the same pair nested this year in a different old Cooper's hawk nest near the one used last year, and are raising a pair of owlets.

Jan. 30: Nest was empty.

Feb. 4-March 9 (days 1-34): Great horned owl was always present, flat on the nest.

March 10 (day 35): Mama owl was upright on nest, probably indicating that at least one chick had hatched. This is consistent with the 30-35 day incubation reported for the species.

March 10 and subsequently: Mama owl remained upright on nest until she left April 9.

March 19 (day 44): One chick seen, covered in white down with a black beak. Mama owl tried to feed it the tip of a rabbit ear, about the size of a quarter. The food item was larger than the chick's head! Chick didn't take it so mama owl swallowed it.

March 20: Two side-by-side intact rabbit ears were visible above edge of nest. A headless cottontail carcass was found nearby.

March 22: A rabbit foot hung out a few inches over top edge of nest.

March 27 (day 52): Two chicks behind mama. She saw me, gathered the chicks under her, and then hooted twice. There was an immediate answering hoot from the southeast but no male owl was seen.

March 31 (day 56): Papa owl was finally identified about 50 yards southeast. The male owl usually was out of sight but near the nest. He provides food for mama and chicks, and helps protect against predators. Great horned owls are large, fierce fighters and few other birds will challenge them. However, if mama leaves the nest unprotected, crows or other birds may prey on the young. During cold weather, mama owl cannot leave the nest for very long because incubated eggs will suffer if they are allowed to get too cold. It has been reported

that papa sometimes spells mama with incubation, but to observe this, the nest must be watched night and day – not possible for most of us!

April 3 & 4 (days 59 & 60): About three weeks after hatching, chicks are now much larger and still share the nest with mama owl.

April 7 (day 63): Two large chicks were in nest with mama owl.

April 9 (day 65): Mama owl moved out of nest to a nearby branch. Nest is too small for all three of them.

April 10 (day 66): Mama owl remained out of the nest, perched nearby.

April 11 (day 67): Mama owl back in nest with chicks. Very crowded!

April 12-14 (days 68-70): Mama owl perched a variable distance away from nest, as much as 10-12 feet. Chicks were on nest, stretching and moving around.

April 15 (day 71): Mother owl back in nest; papa owl seen southeast, about 50 yards in the same spot as previously.

April 16 (day 72): Mama owl was out of nest but nearby. Chicks were standing in nest; one was feeding on something unidentified.

April 17 (day 73), 4:30 p.m.: Both chicks in nest, mama a few feet away.

April 18 (day 74), 10:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m.: **Catastrophe or Rite of Passage?** Only one chick was visible, standing on edge of nest. Mama owl and the other chick missing. Ground search around tree and in nearby trees unproductive. Papa owl was not seen on either the AM or PM visit.

April 19 (day 75), 9:30 a.m.: One chick was visible in nest, and mama owl was in an adjacent tree, very close to the nest. Papa owl was found southeast of nest in a new location after he hooted, but there was no answer from mama owl. Ground under nest site was searched again without finding the missing owlet.

April 20 (day 76), 11 a.m.: Only one owlet was present, perching on a short limb near the nest, “branching.” Adult owls or the other nestling were not seen.

April 21 (day 77), 11 a.m.: Only one chick was in nest; no adult owls were seen in nest tree or nearby. The missing chick was found in a tree about 20 feet up with mama owl, along the trail about 120 yards from the nest site. The owlet scrambled easily up and down a nearby vertical large branch adjacent to mama owl. Finding the owlet safe and sound suggests it may be usual for branching owlets to fall from the nest tree, land uninjured on the ground, and be cared for by a parent owl.

April 22 (day 78), 11 a.m.: One chick was branching near the nest but the tree held no other owls. The mama and owlet which were seen 120 yards from nest site on the previous day were no longer there. An adult owl was identified in another location, east of the Silvery Minnow Channel and 50-60 yards east of the nest tree, apparently alone. When approached, it flew west, passed by the nest tree, and perched in a treetop to the southwest.

April 24-27 (days 79-83): No owl of any age was found in the nest tree or elsewhere by me. Another observer saw an owlet in a nest tree on April 23, so it must have left the nest tree sometime that day or night, prior to April 24. Both owlets, after initially landing on the ground, are likely now in the care of one or both of the parents; they are spending most of their time in trees, learning hunting and other survival skills by watching their parents, and probably have not left the general area of their natal nest. Subsequent days' observations tend to confirm this, as follows:

April 28 (day 84): One adult owl and two owlets were seen at dusk. The adult flew off, probably a short way, but could not then be found. The two owlets were perching on branches about 50 yards east of where mama and chick were seen April 21. Both appeared healthy and were quickly moving from branch to branch. One flew to a nearby tree, perhaps three-to-four yards. One owlet appeared to be eating something.

April 29 (day 85): Two owlets were found in the same tree as yesterday. There was an adult great horned owl in a tree about ten yards north. All seemed healthy.

April 30 (day 86): Both owlets were in the same tree as the day before when seen about 7:15 p.m. There was intermittent, very soft hooting from the south. I walked south slowly, trying to find the source. The (likely female) owl was about 200 yards south of the chicks and was facing south. She did not hoot when I was visible. I then went back to the owlet tree just in time to see one owlet fly south to another tree, perhaps 20 yards away. It was walking on a branch when another adult owl, probably the male since it appeared smaller, flew from the north past the original owlet tree and landed very near the owlet which had arrived there two or three minutes earlier. This is when the hooting frequency, still from the south, increased and was appreciably louder.

The female had flown to about 50 yards south of the owlet and was now facing north so that throat movements were visible during the hooting. The male owl was not hooting, but did make several short, fast flights to other nearby trees. There were some soft, single sounds which seemed to emanate from the owlet. The male owl returned to the same branch occupied by the chick and seemed to check it by nuzzling it about the head. It brought what looked like the posterior half of a small rabbit. The owlet made some apparent feeding moves, but shortly the male owl took the rabbit and flew off with it to another tree not visible by me. This was about 8 p.m. and it was nearly dark, so I started back and checked the original owlet tree one last time. The remaining chick had left that tree but was visible in

another tree four or five yards to the north. So it had not responded correctly to mama owl's hooting invitation to venture south!

May 1 (day 87): No owls found today.

May 2 (day 88), 1 and 7 p.m.: Flying lessons continue. The two owlets were found at dusk in a tree close to their location on day 86, with an adult owl softly hooting to the southeast. With the continued hooting, the owlets began to move about, stretch their wings, and make soft single sounds. Hooting continued. One owlet flew southeast to the next tree, about 20 yards, and the second followed in two or three minutes. They landed on the same branch, then moved to different spots. The hooting was then interrupted by a Cooper's hawk which made several close passes by the adult owl and perched on a nearby branch for 30 seconds or so, all this accompanied by much kee-kee-keeing. Then the Cooper's flew away. The adult owl flew to the next tree closer to the fledgling flyers. I moved to a closer vantage point, and then noticed a much larger owl on a nearby branch, apparently looking south, its back to me. The area to the south was covered in short grass and sparse, rather small, trees. Good hunting grounds for rabbits? This owl appeared definitely larger than the hooting owl, but I was not able to compare them side-by-side and could not evaluate whether feather fluffing might have made it appear larger. Anyway, when I looked away for a moment, it disappeared and was not seen again. Was the papa rather than the mama owl the one calling to the young? The owlets remained in the same tree, not responding further to parental encouragement to fly, when I started back at 8:05 p.m.

May 4 (day 90), 11 a.m.: Both owlets found in the same tree as on 4/30. Adult owl was identified nearby to the north in a new location where it was very well concealed on the outside elbow of a limb. The body coloration blended with the bark color and texture. Even knowing where it was, I could not identify it without binoculars. 7 p.m.: One owlet in the same tree as this morning, the other in a tree further south. Only one adult owl seen, which hooted intermittently. There were numerous short flights by both owlets and adult owl until darkness prompted my departure about 8:15. Owlets are flying more and with less hesitation about taking off from their perches.

May 5 (day 91), 3 p.m.: One adult great horned owl and the two owlets were found in their favorite tree. No flying observed.

May 6 (day 92): Did not visit the bosque.

May 7 (day 93): Both owlets and parents in the same area as previously. The two owlets were found side-by-side on a bare branch, looking in my direction. First one and then the other flew away to the north, landing in different trees. I turned around and found an adult owl which seemed small (male?) to my south, which hooted a few times and obliged by sitting still for a photo. Thinking I might have intimidated the owls, I retreated about 7:50 p.m. The

adult owl was still visible when another adult took off, apparently from the ground and landed in a nearby tree. One adult then flew northwest, very close to the ground, one or two feet, to a vantage point alongside the trail and ahead of me. I approached, but the owl took off and disappeared. Upon return to the Nature Center, I heard hooting in the bosque coming from west of the pump house. Everything in the bosque was too dark to see unaided, but with the light-gathering help of binocs, I saw an owlet high in a tree moving about and opening and closing its wings, seemingly in response to the hooting. It then flew south, gaining considerable altitude before it was lost to view.

May 8 (day 94): The owls were not in their usual location but hooting was heard about 8:10 p.m. An adult owl was then located at the south edge of their usual one-acre ellipse. The mama (?) owl faced south and continued to hoot for a minute or so after it was found, then vanished the moment I looked away. The second adult or the owlets were not seen.

May 9 (day 95), 11 a.m.: No owls found along the Bosque Trail. 7:50 p.m.: No owls in the usual location. I was walking south from the Bosque Trail on an informal trail about 120 yards when an owlet flew from a treetop along the trail to another tree about 20 yards south. About 7:55, I began to hear soft hooting coming from the east where I identified an adult owl. After a few minutes, the adult flew south, landing on a partially fallen tree trunk. The owlet was not seen near the adult and had also disappeared from view. I started back about 8:15, due to darkness. After a few steps, I saw an adult owl swiftly flying south, very low to the ground to the east. It flew to the general area where the other adult had been, although by then, neither were visible due to darkness.

May 10 (day 96), 8 p.m.: About 200 yards south into the Little Wood, there was soft hooting from the east. Walked toward it and found an owlet silhouetted on a tree branch. A short distance away, there was a silent adult owl on a low branch. Hooting continued from the southeast. Followed it to find another adult owl hooting. Started back at 8:20 when the hooting owl moved to a more northerly but not visible location.

May 11 (day 97), 11 a.m.: Both adult owls and both owlets were found in a southeast portion of the Little Woods. Mama owl flew from one tree to another. I swiveled to find papa owl and beyond him, the two chicks in the next tree beyond. Both owlets were quiet and not moving.

May 12 (day 98): Walked the Little Woods from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m. without seeing or hearing an owl. Now that the owlets can fly proficiently, they are likely to range widely and be difficult to locate.