

ing toward the chicks with a mouse in its beak. I was now certain they were not abandoned. During the day I could work on a setup without disturbing the adult birds.

For several days I worked. Over time, I gradually narrowed the opening of the doorway using cardboard. Each

night I had to watch the adult birds to ensure my progression was not interfering with feeding their young. During this time I also installed a post with barbed wire, and moved it a little higher each day to avoid frightening the owls.

The setup also included using a makeshift baler twine fence shaped as a funnel to create a flight path over the post and into the doorway of the blind. To make this, I used a frame of two by fours that came outward from the doorway about fifteen feet, with vertical supports to hold it. Starting at the ground, I ran baler twine up one side, across the top, and down to the ground on the other side. I did this every six inches until I had a funnel extending from the doorway the whole fifteen feet. The entrance to the funnel near the post was about five feet wide.

The post was mounted about 15 feet above the ground, even with the flight path of the owl. I added blooming prickly pear cactus and buffel grass to my setup. This would make it look like any barbed wire

On The Wing by Derrick Hamrick

Hissing sounds greeted me as I peeked around the corner. There they were—four young barn owls maybe one or two weeks old. They were deafening as they hissed and swayed their little white down-covered bodies in unison. I wrote down the date, their approximate age, and left.

It was April in Live Oak County of south Texas. I was spending one month photographing wildlife on a ranch when I discovered this nest in a deer blind. Several weeks later, when they were about 3 to 4 weeks old, I returned and found the mother away from the nest. This normally means the parent birds have decided the young no longer need brooding (keeping the little ones warm). The parents stay close by, but away from the nest, usually under thick cover.

Returning near sunset, I watched from my car. Using a spotlight with a red filter, and binoculars, I watched as a parent bird glided onto the door opening before walk-

Barn Owl Regurgitating Pellet

by Scott Linstead

While driving around a ranch in Texas, I noticed that a barn owl, spooked by my vehicle, would fly from an unused, elevated deer blind to a nearby perch. I observed this pattern repeatedly on other days. The owl would check to make sure the coast was clear before flying back to its nest in the blind about 30 feet away.

To get this photo, I set up a second blind near the hunting blind. I removed the many branches that interfered with a clear view of the perch. Crawling into the photo blind and setting up the tripod was tough to do without making a sound, and the owl heard me a few times. When the owl spooked, it was twenty-four hours before another attempt could be made. Once I was successfully inside the blind with the camera set up, I had to make a phone call to my assistant to drive the truck down the road and spook the owl onto the branch.

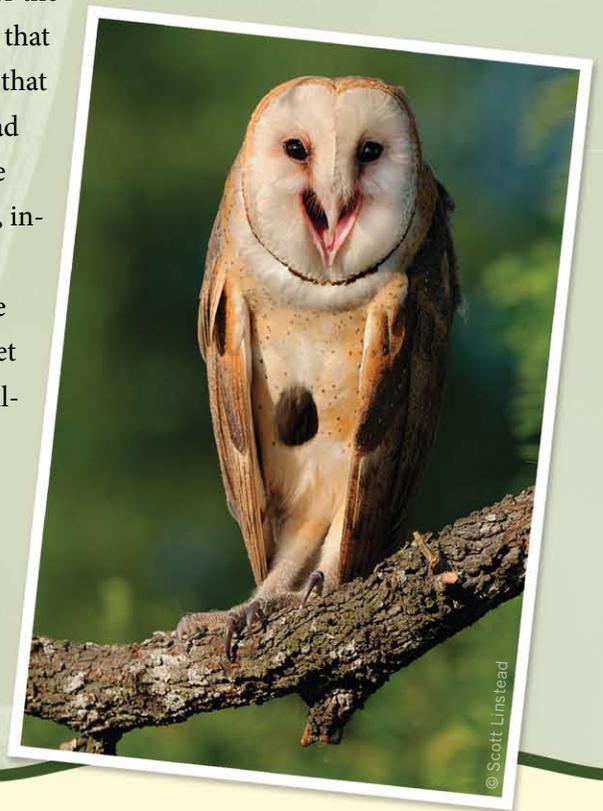
On this particular evening, I crept quietly into the blind at about 6:30 and called my assistant to do a drive-by in the truck. Waiting to see the bird fly successfully onto the perch always got my heart pumping. I knew that having the owl in such close proximity meant the slightest movement might send him off into the woods. It was like a grown-up game of hide and seek, and I had to work hard to keep my excitement from spoiling the shot.

Finally the owl flew to the perch. Even though I knew the owl could not see me in the same way I could see him, it was still a strange experience to observe him so closely through the 10X magnification

of my 500mm lens. When he stared directly at the camera, it felt like he was seeing me, and I would tense up accordingly.

The light was still a bit too harsh for the kind of portrait I was looking for, so I decided to wait for the last warm rays of sunlight. As I waited, I noticed that the owl's beak opened, but no sound came out. Once he repeated the behavior, I knew what I was about to witness, as I had seen this ritual before in other owl species. The telltale heaving motion told me that the owl was about to regurgitate an owl pellet—the bones and fur that cannot otherwise be digested. I set the camera to take a continuous burst of pictures at its highest rate of 8 pictures per second, even though I knew the rapid firing of the shutter might scare the owl. Once I felt that the action was about to occur, I held down the shutter button and let the camera fire a burst of about fifteen pictures.

Looking over the photos later that night, I saw that the series had captured the entire event, including this photo where the owl pellet is visible, falling in front of the owl's chest while his beak remained open.” ◀



fence in south Texas. An infrared beam was used to trip the camera when the owl broke the beam. Two flashes, one on either side of the camera, would illuminate the owl.

With the setup complete, I returned about sunset,

mounted the camera, and turned on the infrared beam and flashes. A lantern hanging near the setup would cause the owl's eyes to begin constricting before the bright flashes would illuminate him. About 9:30 it happened, and what a thrill! ◀