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MAN'S FRIEND, THE SCREECH OWL

by

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There is a bird fight going on down in the old apple tree. All the robins on the place are there dashing about and yelling their heads off. The robins are always starting something. There goes the querulous towhee just following the crowd, and a junco curious to see what it's all about. Yes, you have guessed right. An inoffensive screech owl has been walking in his sleep and blundered into the orchard. This is no place for him in the day time. Every bill is against him, even that double-crosser, the Steller jay, who makes the air ring with: "Traitor! Traitor!" The blasphemy goes on while the hunched-up grayish culprit sits like a sphinx on a limb and looks stupid with staring yellow eyes, or breaks the spell with a forlorn one-sided wink.

For years a family of screech owls has been raised in a big hole of a crippled old cottonwood on our river bank. This is perhaps ninety or a hundred feet below the house for the hillside descends in steep terraces and is well wooded. Each season we look for the coming-out of the owl children. Looking down the hill from our wide terrace on a moonlight night, we catch the movement of a shadow that drops into a dark fir tree and becomes a faintly outlined lump on a limb. We strain our eyes to make out whether the lump moves, of whether it is just imagination on our part. Then softly, tremulously comes the mellow "whinneying" of the parent screech owl from somewhere over the open fields. Something fans lightly in and drops down beside the dark lump on the limb. It comes to life and though soundless from where we are, there are evident movements of the two shadows bobbing on the fir branch. The mother owl is feeding her brood as they perch patiently here and there in the dark trees. Calls and answers and flaring shadows bring the hillside to life, moonbeams slanting through the trees, dimly lighting the placid river far below.

It is a pleasant place for an owl estate and with squatters' rights the screech owls have possessed it for a good many years. I can't remember when the owl family has failed us, for the children come along regularly to keep us company of summer evenings. When old enough to pilot themselves through the woods and over the lawns that are literally perforated with mouse holes, the young owls are a chummy bunch. They float out over the hunting ground, hover on silent wings, then back again to a perch in one of the maple trees just over our heads. As we look at each other- and perhaps talk softly to get acquainted- he is a misty dim picture for us, but for those luminous yellow eyes a face below is as clear as at noonday. The youngsters are used to us and come and go in their breakfast hunting. They are alive to life and "on their own" now, and they are seldom still. They move about on a limb, hop up to a higher one, and suddenly sail out to pick up a scurrying mouse.

In the fall when housekeeping and baby-raising are over, and the owl family are busy building up fat and feathers, there is an electric essence in the air. The cold moonlight glitters on the leaves and frosts the tips of the grass. It picks out a spider web spread on a bush and makes silver lacework of it. The owls are electrified, too, and more talkative. They quicken their pace as they cut through the air with uncanny certainty.

In mid November I leaned out of the window at midnight. Suddenly from the eaves above my head sounded a sharp, "Kyeek! Kyeek!" It startled me at first, and then I knew him. Through the roof and shingles I felt the eager expectancy in the call. He was answered from the hillside below, and then another, until it seemed as if all the owls were talking to each other at once in flute-clear, rippling tones. Whether this was a thrill from the crisp night and adventure- which would not be unbelievable even for owls- I didn't want to determine. I hoped so. The owls out-last me and I went to bed still hearing those clear, singing calls.

One notable thing about this owl is that apparently the birds are

mated for life, or at least they inhabit the same old home tree for a number of years. As far as known, there has been but one pair nesting on our place each year and in the same cottonwood on the river bank. No one thinks of molesting them except to pay a short visit and peek in their door. This summer a couple of curious little boys found one of the owl children sleeping in a willow tree. The little fellow was hard to see because he had stretched himself up thin and straight with his pointed ears stiff, his eyes half closed slits, and his wood-brown body simulating a mottled limb. Considering it a real feat, the boys picked him off his perch and brought him up to the house. After taking a good look and learning something about him, the boys were admonished to carry him back down to the exact perch where they had found him.

Perhaps the strangest thing about the screech owl is what is called "dichromatism," which means the development of two plumage phases, a gray and a red one. Long ago William Dutcher said: "a bird of one color may be mated with a bird of another color, and all of their young may be of one color, either red or gray; or the parents may be of one color and the young of mixed colors." Hence this bird is often called the "mottled owl."

The little screech owl is well known throughout the United States. Scattered over the country are eight kinds typical of their various regions, the Florida screech owl, the Rocky Mountain screech owl, MacFarlane's screech owl, Kennicott's screech owl, Aiken's screech owl, the Mexican or Arizona screech owl, the spotted screech owl, and the flammulated screech owl. The last one is the least in size and little is known about him. He has one distinct peculiarity. The iris of the eyes of all the other owls is yellow, while that of the flammulated owl is a dark chocolate-brown, giving the bird a queer mild expression quite un-owl like. The Kennicott's screech owl is the one found commonly in Oregon, ranging from this state to Sitka, Alaska.

With the exception of the burrowing owl, the screech owl feeds more extensively on insects than any of the other owls. It is a diligent mouser,

but also will gather in beetles, frogs, scorpions, crickets, grasshoppers, cutworms, and even occasionally small fish. He also has some sparing records of chipmunks, wood rats, flying squirrels, and moles. As nearly three-fourths of his food consists of injurious mammals and insects, there is little question that he should be carefully protected.

A few years ago a farmer in the Milwaukee region planted about an acre of young peach trees. In the fall he had carefully piled some mowed grass around the base of each tree as a protection during the winter. Previous experience had not taught him that he had furnished a winter food supply for the mice exactly where they wanted it. In the spring he found every tree girdled under the grass, and his peach orchard was dead. He should have called in the screech owl brigade to clean out the mice.

The common field mouse and the white-footed mouse come out at night, scurrying across the fields and in and out of their numerous holes. This is the time they attack trees and do so much damage. The screech owl knows this well for his hunting time is at night also. The owl's yellow eyes see every movement in the dark. He fans noiselessly over his hunting ground and detects the slightest footstep of a little rodent. His drop is sure: his clutch is death.