

MAX R. TERMAN

Messages from an Owl



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*M*ESSAGES FROM AN OWL

But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the
birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to
the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the
sea inform you. Which of all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
In his hand is the life of every creature
and the breath of all mankind.

—Job 12: 7–10 NIV

MESSAGES FROM AN OWL



Max R. Terman

with photographs by the author

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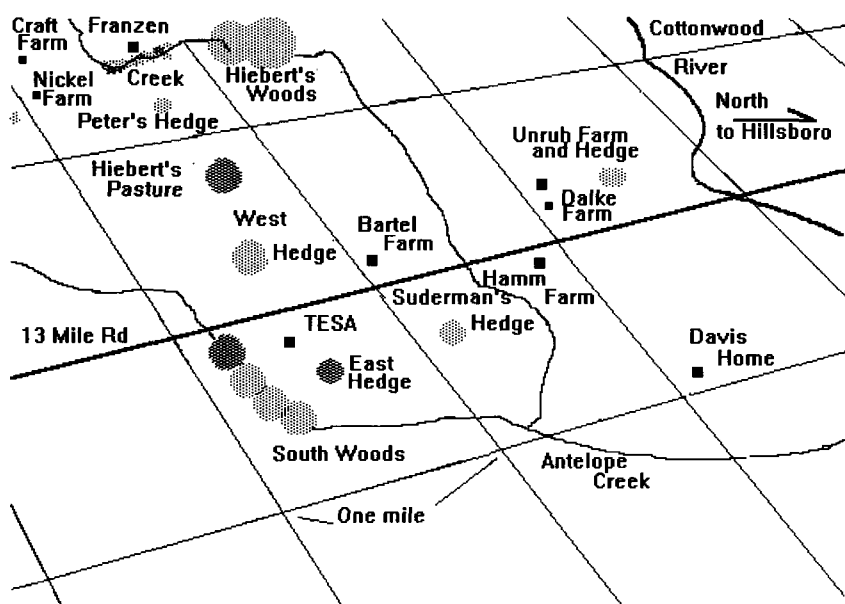
 TO THE MEMORY OF MY PARENTS

BEN F. TERMAN

WHO LOVED BOOKS AND WOULD
HAVE LOVED TO READ THIS ONE
AND

VIOLA S. TERMAN

WHO LOVED ANIMALS AND
NURTURED THIS LOVE IN ME



Map of area described in book.

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◆◆◆ PREFACE

FEW OWLS warrant an entire book. Most are hatched, fledged, live their shadowy hidden lives, and die with no note from the human world. Some, however, such as *Bubo*, an owl reared by biologist Bernd Heinrich (see his book *One Man's Owl*), touch people's heart and deserve to be immortalized in print. They are unique individuals that have interacted with humankind in a way that stirs the imagination and sets new perspectives.

As I worked with my special owl, Stripey, I began to recognize in its experiences some illustrative messages about the basic themes of life—experiencing youth, training for adulthood, leaving home, and securing a place in the world. The owl is an example of an organism finding its niche, a role in life that in microcosm reflects our own struggles. I decided to record the episodes of Stripey's behavioral development in captivity—and later in the wild—in a journal and on videotape. I wanted to capture the story of the owl's life by use of radiotelemetry, the use of radio tags. I hoped that the tapes and detailed field notes would add new information about the natural history of owls and the effects of human contact on their development.

This book relates my experiences training and tracking a captive-reared great horned owl. The long-term study of a hand-reared individual by telemetry is to my knowledge unique. Like *Bubo* and Bernd Heinrich, Stripey and I developed a special relationship. Wherever Stripey wandered, I could follow. I was able to “look over my owl's shoulder” as it flew from fence row to fence row, wood to wood, encounter to encounter. I was present when crows bantered and mobbed, when other owls launched fierce attacks, and when a prospective mate caught Stripey's eye. For nearly seven years, I was (and am still) an unlikely companion to this amazing creature.

Owl-watching may not rank highly as a means to contemplate the basic issues of life. But those who have been taught about the workings of the machinery of nature recognize a commonality in the struggles of all organisms. It is particularly enlightening to consider the world through the eyes of an owl equipped with a wild genetic program but reared by the hand of man. What is it like to be a wild owl living on the edge of survival, constantly driven to seek food

and, in season, to reproduce? Genetic predisposition and species-typical training endow these individuals with the ability to secure food and a place to mate and breed, to secure a nest and pass genes on to the next generation. Scientists generally believe that an owl nurtured by humans is forever deprived of this wild heritage because it is forced to focus on the wrong entity as mother, mate, and social peer. Coldly termed an "imprint," the hand-reared owl becomes an ill-adapted creature woefully inadequate for meeting the challenges of life in the wild. Most imprints, if not "put out of their misery," are confined to a cage or aviary to live out their days as incorrigible "misfits," guided not by their will but by faulty wiring.

Even if one is legally sanctioned, one should think long and hard before adopting a wild creature. With Stripey, however, I had no choice. And besides, I had a mission: I wanted to explore this generalization—is an imprint really unable to survive in the wild?

As a scientist hoping to study great horned owls firsthand, I welcomed the opportunity presented by an abandoned owl chick. However, I was only a detached observer until I probed nature from an owl's back. As an animal behaviorist, I customarily approach the study of an animal with a question, a hypothesis, and a plan for testing the hypothesis—the technique of a working scientist—logical, manipulative, and powerfully revealing. Although a potent method for searching out truth, this view sometimes supplants what the naturalist learns by simply watching and listening. I believe in the experimental approach and I am not advocating its abandonment. My intent was to follow a different tack with this bird, however: data on its life should come freely, in an unrestrained environment rather than a laboratory arena. Indeed, this bird put flesh and bones on ideas and theories that I knew about but had never explored. When I began to survey life from the perspective of a wild creature, a new understanding emerged. Details of the private lives of wild creatures are secrets they keep well hidden. But now I had recruited a spy on the wild, an animal reared by the hand of man yet ruled internally by the commands of nature.

From the time it fledged, my owl roamed unrestrained—killing prey, competing for territorial space and for mates, all the while sending messages—messages telling of hunts and kills, fence-row romances, and intense battles over real estate and perching rights. Yet, with me it was tame, its aggression restrained—its natural wariness

held in check. How did this owl transcend the gap between its world and mine? Was it just luck that it maintained its natural force, yet returned repeatedly to be with me? Perhaps I acquired Stripey at just the right time, at the end of the critical period when the species identity was set but not hardened. I suspect that by the smallest of odds, this was an owl with a crack open to humanity.



Many people were a part of this adventure. Tabor College is a small institution with a big heart, and I appreciate the time given me to research and write about my owl. My wife Jan and daughters Katy and Kerry deserve my unlimited praise for enduring all the indignities that naturally accompany a great horned owl. My students in animal behavior and ecology at Tabor College, especially Peter Johns and Carl Dick, helped immensely in rearing and radio-tracking activities. The late Virleen Bailey, naturalist, friend, and colleague who died in 1993, helped edit the manuscript and provided many words of encouragement to a sometimes discouraged owl-watcher. Viola Gossen, a true friend of our family and a long-time teacher, also read and critiqued the manuscript. Her straightforward demand for clarity no doubt made many paragraphs more readable. Craig Weatherby, fellow owl researcher at Adrian College in Michigan, helped immensely in providing advice and information basic to tagging and following Stripey. Richard Wall and Allen Hiebert, friends and colleagues at Tabor, provided much encouragement and more than once lent a helping hand in working with Stripey. Special thanks go to those friends in the scientific community who were excellent sounding boards for the veracity of some of my explanations for Stripey's behavior. I also appreciate the help of Jack Repcheck and Alice Calaprice of Princeton University Press, and the reviews of Bernd Heinrich of the University of Vermont and Peter Grant of Princeton University. Finally, I want to thank my neighbors whose hedgerows, pastures, and barns were so casually invaded by Stripey and me. I particularly appreciate the help and goodwill of Dan Dalke and John Unruh, on whose properties Stripey now resides.

TESA, Hillsboro, Kansas
May, 1995

*M*ESSAGES FROM AN OWL

The most important requisite in describing an animal is to be sure and give its character and spirit, for in that you have, without error, the sum and effect of all its parts, known and unknown. You must tell what it is to man. Surely the most important part of an animal is its anima, its vital spirit, on which is based its character and all the peculiarities by which it most concerns us. Yet most scientific books which treat animals leave this out altogether, and what they describe are, as it were, phenomena of dead matter.

—Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal*

L AUNCHING NEW LIFE

YOUNG HORNED OWLS THAT ARE RAISED IN CAPTIVITY AND SUBSEQUENTLY RELEASED IN SUITABLE BACK-YARD SURROUNDINGS INVARIABLY REMAIN DEPENDENT ON THEIR HUMAN FOSTER PARENTS UNTIL WELL INTO AUTUMN. MUCH CAN BE LEARNED FROM WATCHING THESE CAPTIVE YOUNGSTERS, WHOSE BEHAVIOR AND DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS CLOSELY PARALLEL THOSE OF WILD HORNED OWLS. BY SUPPLEMENTING RANDOM FIELD OBSERVATIONS OF YOUNG HORNED OWLS IN THE WILD WITH DETAILED OBSERVATIONS OF CAPTIVE ONES, A MORE COMPLETE EXPLANATION OF THEIR ACTIVITIES AFTER NEST DEPARTURE IS MADE POSSIBLE. THESE STUDIES HELP TO AVOID MUCH SPECULATION ON NUMEROUS QUESTIONS THAT MIGHT NEVER BE SETTLED BY OBSERVING WILD OWLS IN THE DARKNESS OF THEIR NATURAL SURROUNDINGS.

—G. Ronald Austing and John B. Holt, wildlife ecologists

◆ ◆ ◆ Occasionally, but not often, the lives of wild animals become entangled with our own. When a young great horned owl in a park in a small Kansas town fell to the ground, there began a story of teacher becoming student, of subject informing scientist.

One sunny March day in 1988, a local minister became involved not only in the affairs of his congregation but also in the serendipitous aspects of nature. This is noteworthy because some men of the cloth tend to be so driven by spiritual motives that they seldom tune in on natural phenomena. Pastor Dennis Fast was not one of these. When he discovered a fallen owlet, the instinct to “rescue the

perishing" prevailed. Immediately he called me to say that a young owl, nearly starving, was huddled at the base of a tree in the Hillsboro city park.

As a professor of biology at a small college in a country town, I often receive such calls, and over the years have cared for a plethora of snakes, raccoons, opossums, and other small denizens of the wilderness. Many of these animals became research subjects for my ecology and animal behavior students. None of the previous laboratory inhabitants, however, would enrich my life like this one owl.

I was reluctant to go out after an owl that probably was only waiting to be fed by its foraging parents. However, there was a chance that this animal had indeed been abandoned and I was the only person in the area with legal certification to collect wildlife specimens. On my way to the car, I met Richard Wall, a fellow biologist and my colleague in the department. Never too busy for the intriguing moments in life, Richard quickly jumped in my van and drove with me to the city park.

Near the park entrance, three young boys clustered around the base of a Siberian elm. All were pointing to a squawking ball of grimy cotton with a gaping black beak. It was thin and gaunt and had not been fed for some time. "That bird's in trouble." Richard's voice reflected his gentle, concise manner—a demeanor humble in appearance, that masks his considerable talents. Richard is a tall, robust man with a full reddish beard, one of my students from my early years of teaching. As frequently happens in towns like Hillsboro, he had come back from the big university to his roots, to continue growing where he sprouted.

After informing the boys of the little bird's species and its future disposition, we stooped to inspect the defiant black eyes and clacking bill that confronted us. I reached in front of Richard for the noisy little owlet. At once the beak clacked louder and the dagger-sharp talons raised skyward. This bird was already in full possession of its species' fierce disposition. Since I had handled owls previously, I knew how to grasp the young raptor safely by the legs above the talons. Such a move takes practice and cool nerves. Eventually, the little owl balanced itself on the surface of my hand, amazingly content and quiet for one being handled by an alien species.

Our subject was about four weeks old. I estimated its age by my knowledge of a series of photographs from a 1940s study done at the University of Kansas, "the prairie Harvard." In this study, a pair of

owls had reared their young near an upper-story window of the Natural History Museum, where two alert professors photographed them as they developed. It was research of considerable worth performed on a very common but neglected species. Great horned owls are noted for their ferocity and cryptic habits, making them unpopular candidates for Ph.D. theses and short-term grant proposals. This ferocity is reflected in an account given to naturalist A. C. Bent (in *Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey*) by a resident of the state of Washington in the early 1900s:

As a young man, in Tacoma, the writer once lived in a house which immediately adjoined a large wooden church. My chamber window looked upon a flat kitchen roof, through which projected a brick chimney some ten feet away. At three o'clock one morning a horrible nightmare gave way to a still more horrible waking. Murder most foul was being committed on the roof just outside the open window, and the shrieks of the victims (at least seven of them!) were drowned by the imprecations of the attacking party—fire-eating pirates to the number of a dozen. Pandemonium reigned and my bones were liquid with fright—when suddenly the tumult ceased; nor could I imagine through a whole sick day what had been the occasion of the terrifying visitation. But two weeks later the conflict was renewed—at a merciful distance this time. Peering out in to moonlight, I beheld one of these Owls perched upon the chimney of church hard by, gibbering and shrieking like one possessed. Cat-calls, groans, and demoniacal laughter were varied by wails and screeches, as of souls in torment—an occasion most memorable. The previous serenade had evidently been rendered from the kitchen chimney—and I pray never to hear its equal.

While they universally excite our nights with their multifarious calls, they are themselves a consummate mystery. What if just one of them could communicate with us? What messages about the world of the night would it reveal? The idea of rearing my own emissary to the wild began to take form in my consciousness.

I judged the bird to be a male because of its small size and comparatively subdued manner (females from the beginning tend to be larger and noticeably more aggressive). The owlet was obviously in food distress and appeared to be abandoned, but young birds on the ground may be merely waiting for the parents to bring them food. Apparently both parents feed the young, a noteworthy event in itself. Great horned owlets commonly leave the nest at about five to

six weeks of age to inhabit the nearby brush and rank grass, where they are later located and fed by the parents. Great horned owls are noted for being very protective of their young—even to the point of attacking and seriously injuring persons approaching nests or chicks on the ground.

A thorough search of the area where we found our owl showed no sign of the parents. Given its emaciated condition and the obvious absence of either parent, I decided that this baby owl had indeed been abandoned. At the same time, the realization began to take shape that this owlet provided an excellent opportunity for a behavioral study using radiotelemetry. Through my work in outdoor biology, I possessed the proper state and federal permits and had for some time been looking for an animal on which to do a long-term telemetry study. This would be an ideal project to base at my rural home on the prairie about five miles away from campus. But first, we would have to nurse him back to health in my lab at Tabor College.

My plot of prairie, which I call TESA (an acronym for Terman Environmental Study Area), is a beautiful fifteen-acre sliver of native grass salvaged from the plow and the cow. My house is a passive solar earth-covered structure (an underground house with one side exposed to the sun)—a mere smile in the side of a hill—blends perfectly with its surroundings of big and little bluestem and prairie wildflowers. Pheasants, quail, wild turkeys, and a host of other natural “tenants” regularly visit the front yard and the nearby pond, seemingly unaware of the low-profile human habitation. With its hedge-bordered expanse of grass and the nearby wooded creek, TESA would be a great place to release the owl. However, the area was inhabited by other great horned owls—a fact that was to have a major impact on the future of my owl.

Bernd Heinrich, a University of Vermont biology professor and author, had written a book about a similar adventure with a hand-reared owl. I studied the pages of his *One Man's Owl*, relishing the communality of experience. Heinrich, however, had not been able continually to follow his owl, *Bubo*. Armed with the technology of radiotelemetry, I would be able to climb on the back of my owl and through the magic of radio waves accompany it wherever it went, an idea I found exciting.

After loading the little owl into a cardboard box, Richard and I carried it back to the college. Tabor College is an institution much like its harboring town of Hillsboro—small, seldom noticed, but



Aerial photos of TESA and solar earth-sheltered house: (top) looking east; (bottom) looking north.

good at turning Midwestern sons and daughters into articulate servants of society. Such a student was Pete Johns, the tall, angular offspring of a USDA official from Colorado. As a student in my animal behavior class, Pete was given the young owl for his course project.

What about a name for this bird? This was no small matter. In the words of philosopher Francis Bacon: "Name, though it seem but a superficial and outward matter, yet it carrieth much impression and enchantment." As a scientist, I knew this business of giving names seemed anthropomorphic—forcing humanity's mode on those not human. However, everything has to have a name or we cannot refer to it in any specific way. Even the biblical Adam was directed to give names to creatures as one of his first tasks.

The new arrival was visited by many "Adams," each exercising a basic urge to bestow a name on the little orphan. Owls, by their very appearance, literally demand to be called "Henry" or "George" or some other name that would fit an old, rather wise and stodgy gentleman. Owls have always fascinated humans—their wide blinking eyes, ear tufts, powerful beaks, and mournful voices both endear and repulse. Because owls are often perceived as both beautiful and sinister, wise and evil, something like a love-fear relationship has arisen. No simple task, giving this owl an appropriate name!

Pete decided to call it—simply enough—Stripey. Not too imaginative, but possibly indicative of how owls recognize each other in a fence row. Subtle differences in spots or stripes or angles of the feathers may allow for individual recognition. This owl later proved that he could and did recognize individuals of his own and other species. For Stripey, the name was appropriate, for his stripes were strongly evident.

Stripey's progenitors were of the Midwestern race of the widespread great horned owl species. Each race, of which there are twelve in North America, is adapted to its local environment. Stripey's genes reflected the contributions of thousands of owl generations that may have survived and passed on their heritage simply because a stripe on the breast resembled, to prey or predator, a beam of sun across a shielding cedar tree. As a hatchling, Stripey had certainly been exposed to the behavioral heritage of his mother, a phantom winged tigress who inhabited the local golf course and city park. While golfing, I had often come across the scattered remains of her victims, a circular pile of feathers in the middle of the fairway—all that remained of a dove or quail that was not quick enough. Certainly this grand hunter could impart through her genes a disposition amenable to developing what it took to live with humans.

Would Stripey function like the owl he was, or would he be an "imprint"—a technical term describing an individual with a mis-

taken species self-image. Had I sentenced Stripey to this mental purgatory somewhere between identity and confusion? Raptor rehabilitation centers go to great lengths to prevent human contact with the many young birds that are brought to them; we have all seen the mother puppets used in the California condor release program. The conventional theory is that imprints are unable to relate to others of their own species once they are imprinted and thus cannot be released to the wild. In the few observational accounts available, imprinted owls are described as loners, always in the corner of the cage, never interacting normally. There are no accounts, however, of the fate of imprints released to the wild and followed for any length of time.

With Stripey perched contentedly in a large aquarium in the back of the laboratory, Pete and I sat in my office planning his future. The idea was to rear this owl with maximum human contact, then release him and keep tabs on his activity through telemetry. I warned Pete: "You'll almost have to live with Stripey—feeding him, touching him, and basically substituting yourself for his mother. We must be certain that he has adequate opportunity to identify with humans."

My now wide-eyed student intently considered the implications of what I had just said. Pete was a lover of nature and the chance to interact with an owl excited him far beyond the natural bounds of a course project. After briefing him on what to look for in Stripey's emerging behavioral repertoire, he left my office in joyous kinship to Jane Goodall, or at least to Grizzly Adams. Within the hour I saw Pete and his girlfriend in the back of the lab finger-pecking the bill of the young owl in a gesture of mutual "grooming."

Owls are funny about grooming. Even wild owls will caress the top of a human head presented to them. Owl rehabilitators will often coax a reluctant invalid owl to feed in this way. A fearful wild owl will, supposedly, be calmed and placated by this sign of friendship, bow to its caretaker, engage in grooming, and then eat. Although my hair was often groomed by Stripey, I would be reluctant to try it with a winged tiger whom I did not know.

Stripey was now squarely in the world of humans. He had been thrust into one of the most interactive of human institutions—a college. At Tabor College, much important communication is accomplished by people who never plan to bump into each other but conveniently do—a characteristic of the milieu created by the small size

and intimacy of the place. Important decisions are more often made in hallways than committee rooms, a situation that eventually culminated in the decision to let Pete and me keep Stripey.

Feeding the owl was the first significant problem we faced. Within days, we realized that the appetite of the white fluffball with the gaping bill was well along to outstripping our ability to trap cotton rats, deer mice, prairie voles, and whatever other rodents resided on my bit of prairie. We were already spending most of our spare time trapping food for this insatiable bird. What more could we do? Pete and I did not want to completely sacrifice our home and social lives to ease the hunger pangs of one small owl.

The answer came to me after noticing a huge pile of raw meat scraps that remained after one of the college's special steak dinners. If we could occasionally give the owl a mouse to maintain his search image (which later proved to be very important), perhaps we could keep Stripey satisfied with leftovers from the cafeteria. It was worth a try.

Substituting meat for mice was no problem. The owl thrived—literally growing exponentially while filling the lab with long, attention-grabbing 'cheeeeps' or begging calls. In the wild, these cheeps are emitted by young owls who have left the nest; the cheeping stops as they mature. The parents, hearing these vocalizations, can then readily locate and feed their offspring. Stripey never ceased giving these calls, even as an adult. Somehow, the image of this large Lord of the Night, cheeping from the limb of a stately oak, seemed both ill-suited and altogether hilarious.

We soon appreciated the amazing amount of effort expended by parent owls to fledge just one of their offspring. This labor characterizes parenting in general, especially relative to the formidable costs involved. For wild animals, life strategies are set by the comparative costs (energy requirements) of reproduction. If food or other resources are in short supply, reproduction is halted and reserved for a better time. The fine-tuning of environment and physiology is set with no greater precision than in procreation. We humans, removed from the direct effects of natural selection and living in our own created world, often forget the tremendous implications entailed in deciding (or not deciding) to produce offspring.

In the weeks that followed, Pete and his girlfriend played endlessly with the growing owl. At least twice a day, Stripey was taken out on the lawn and his cage was opened. He strolled out like a chair-

man of the board. If this owl was innately afraid of humans, he covered his fear with the bravado of a novice bullfighter. This bird was a joy to be with, and his public appearance was often the premier event on campus.

With the eyes of an animal lover and naturalist, I found this playtime with Stripey delightfully gratifying. Here was the bird we had rescued now developing into a sturdy owl specimen. As a scientist, however, I wondered whether I was observing the development of an owl or the transformation of a wild animal into a human plaything.

BASIC NEEDS AND BASIC TRAINING

GIVE ME A DOZEN HEALTHY INFANTS, WELL-FORMED, AND MY OWN SPECIFIED WORLD TO BRING THEM UP IN AND I'LL GUARANTEE TO TAKE ANY ONE AT RANDOM AND TRAIN HIM TO BECOME ANY TYPE OF SPECIALIST I MIGHT SELECT—DOCTOR, LAWYER, ARTIST, MERCHANT CHIEF AND, YES, EVEN BEGGARMAN AND THIEF, REGARDLESS OF HIS TALENTS, PENCHANTS, TENDENCIES, ABILITIES, VOCATIONS, AND RACE OF HIS ANCESTORS.

—John Broadus Watson, behaviorist

◆ ◆ ◆ Winter's final grip had released the Kansas countryside, and all sorts of wild things were busy filling the fields and grasslands with offspring, following the driving motif of nature—reproduction. Yet only a small percentage of the young of any animal ever mature to adulthood. Most die in the jaws of a predator or from exposure to the elements. Even the owls, near the top the food chain, lose many of their broods to accident, disease, or other predators. Stripey, dumped prematurely from the nest by a March windstorm, probably would have been numbered among the lost, relegated to anonymity in nature's never-ending struggles. But with the help of the college food service and the local rodent community, Stripey grew quickly—trading white feathery down for the pin-cushion appearance of a juvenile. He had provided much data for Pete's project, and now Pete, like his subject, was leaving the (academic) nest for a summer job. The owl would pass solely into my hands.

As I continued to observe our adolescent predator, I reflected on how this owl, perched contentedly in his lab cage, existed only because I had prevented it from being another statistic in the mortality tables of owls. Because this one owl lived when it should have died, did the natural world go out of alignment? Did my action result in

any significant directional change? Are chance and circumstance the only factors determining whether any particular individual endures? I think not. Any creature's existence depends on the fine thread of probability weaving in and out of the fabric of generations. I believe the Weaver of this eternal cloth allowed this bird and me to meet. Many who ply my trade tend to be skeptics and depend solely on the human mind to construct answers to infinite questions. A proper respect for humility convinces me that much of reality might well transcend human thought.

Stripey as
juvenile.



One day after a particularly tough lecture before a largely somnolescent classroom audience, I yielded to an intense need to escape the stuffy halls of academe. I decided to take Stripey out to TESA, my piece of the open prairie. After we arrived, I introduced him to a cage in my open-faced pole barn. The 4 × 6 foot wooden cage was constructed by a student years ago for a wild adult owl that had lost a wing to a shotgun blast. That owl survived four years before succumbing to an unknown malady. Possibly those four years away from flight and freedom were all it could endure. Sadly, up to 90 percent of great horned owls may die at the hand of man. Too often, fear, superstition, and outright meanness overwhelm good sense. Now, the cage for one who should not have died so soon was to be the launching pad to freedom for one who should not have lived.

Stripey immediately took to his new home, apparently comfortable in the wood-and-wire cage with a tree limb for a perch. In the