

August 9, 1952

Dr. T. C. Stephens,
Editor, Wilson Bulletin,
Morningside College,
Sioux City, Iowa.

Dear Dr. Stephens:

I am enclosing a final draft of my paper on the horned owl for use in the bulletin. I had purposely omitted in our previous correspondence saying whether or not the manuscript I submitted to you was for publication; I was not sure until I heard from my various critics that I wanted it to be published any place.

I have changed the title to "Studies on the Behavior of the Great Horned Owl" as I was informed that the word psychic in the former title would have laid me open to violent criticism on the part of the animal psychologists. I will leave this up to you, however. If you think the old title is better, then go ahead and use it.

I am enclosing also some copies of two of my recent reprints. One, Wild Life Management, might have sufficiently general interest so that you might care to pass it around where it will do the most good. If you care for additional copies, let me know.

Before I forget about it I am going to ask you to do me a favor. Unless my paper on the nesting and the life equation of bob-white is already in press, would you mind looking over the last page or two and cutting out the following sentence: "We have little right to begrudge culling losses by which the species has been refined to the product we now know; natural selection claims some fit along with the unfit, but in the main the birds win or lose on their own merits, within the limitations of their environment." I am not asking this because I have changed my views upon the contents of the sentence; however, this has to do with opinion rather than well substantiated facts, and I try to leave as much opinion as possible out of my papers. Although I have had extensive correspondence with McAtee on the subject of natural selection, he has not entirely swung me around. I merely wish to play safe by not publishing anything I might wish to take back later.

Dr. T. C. Stephens

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Unfortunately, I have mislaid your last letter to me so I shall have to rely upon memory to answer the specific questions which you asked.

The manner of attack of the horned owl concerning which you inquired varies according to the individual owl. In most cases a bird aims for the back of the neck, although last spring I received some rather deep wounds in my side. Other raptors, notably the marsh hawk, hit for the top of the head, and I was struck similarly by a barred owl. I do not think that the impact is caused by the body of the attacking bird, although momentum may aid materially the force with which the talons strike. On the one case when I was most severely mauled by a horned owl the bird almost knocked me out of the tree by a blow that grazed my shoulder and hit me on the neck.

I am half way planning to write up a note for your bulletin on the fate of the "runt" in raptor nests. In general, I would say that the last owlet to hatch from a clutch of eggs stands little chance of survival if it has to compete with more than one or two nest mates. I recall vividly the nest of a long-eared owl which started out with six young but lost the smallest three in the course of a week. In hawks the young seem to stand a better chance, although I have an observation or two on marsh hawk nests which show that the youngest is not assured of survival. Whether or not I write up this note depends upon how much material on the subject I find I have.

I might mention that I do not think the elimination of weak raptors in the nest is of great value from the standpoint of natural selection. Granted that the last bird to hatch is weak, it is not necessarily weak on account of inherent defects; it is simply under an accidental disadvantage. It may be that the strongest bird in the whole brood intrinsically happened to be the last one to hatch out.

I am now leaving on my waterfowl study trip throughout Minnesota and the Dakotas and expect to return via Sioux City sometime in the fore part of September. I shall then drop in to see you again. In case you wish to get in touch with me in the meantime, you might address me at College Station, Brookings, South Dakota; that is, until about the 20th of the month.

Very truly yours,

Paul L. Errington,
Research Assistant Professor,
Wild Life Research.

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