

Twin Lakes owls had to find a new nest this spring

By Patricia Logan

They were the unofficial, fuzzy, wide-eyed mascots of the fight to preserve the fields south of the Twin Lakes Open Space. But the hollow cottonwood that hosted great horned owls nearly every spring, collapsed, forcing the raptors to find a new place to raise their young.

There couldn't have been a more picture-perfect place for people to ooh and aah and get close-up images of owlets. In winter, a pair of great horned owls would nestle into the cavity of a dead cottonwood tree along the ditch next to the LoBo Trail and incubate their future. In spring, masked balls of fuzz would peer above the broken bark of their family home and survey the world for the first time.

From the owlet's perspective, they'd often see eyes looking back, mostly the two-eyed kind, but several of the one-eyed variety too, the odd ones that never blinked. My camera lens was among them. A couple of years ago I spent numerous spring evenings in the company of owls and their admirers, capturing video and images that I treasure, especially now.

I live about 10 minutes away and for reasons I can't remember, I didn't make it to the nest last year. This spring, it was the stay-at-home restrictions. But when we finally got to safer-at-home, I decided to check on the nest. At first I thought I must be in the wrong spot. It was disorienting to be standing in the place I'd been so many times and see such a different scene. The owl tree had folded over on itself, severed right where the nest had been. It was as if it took one last bow at the end of a wildly popular play.

I stood and stared, trying to figure out how it happened. When I asked around, some of the neighbors thought it was a heavy snow or wind that took it out at least a year and half ago.

It was a great run. Dozens of owls fledged safely into the world thanks to that old tree. And hundreds, maybe thousands of people delighted in watching them grow. There was always a small crowd gathered on spring evenings when the weather was good.

I'd aim to arrive in late afternoon for one of the prime spots that were unobstructed by the tangle of webby branches, thick and thin, that surrounded the nest. There, beside the gently rushing water of the ditch, I would extend the legs of my tripod, snap in my video camera, zoom in on the hollow and wait, hoping for a magical combination of golden light flickering in golden eyes.

The actual nest was below the hollow so the owlets could stay tucked away if they wanted. I couldn't see what was going on down there, but I suspect it was cozy and comfy, sheltered from the elements.

The owlets were pretty good at playing games with their fans. The action usually began with a tease, a few nascent feathers sneaking out through a break in the trunk below the hollow. Then there'd be a flash of movement. I figured the siblings eventually got tired of being stuck down there together and started wrestling as brothers and sisters are prone to do.

One of my favorite moments was seeing a marble eye peak through a gap in the trunk. The owlet surreptitiously assessed his kingdom and subjects before making a full appearance.

Sooner or later, the babies--that year there were two--would decide to give us what we came for and stick a fuzzy, masked face out of the hole. On the best days one of the little superheroes would haul herself up and grip the bottom ledge of the cavity with her talons, finding newfound

strength and balance in young legs. The owlet glowed in warm light against a dark background, in a frame made of jagged bits of wood that was so perfect it must have been Photoshopped by nature.

It's no wonder the owls drew a crowd. I watched kids roll up on their bikes with their moms and dads, stopping, pointing, smiling. Joggers would sometimes stop in mid step when they realized what everyone was looking at. The owls were more than just neighborhood celebrities. I met people from Denver, Colorado Springs and Wyoming.

But the neighbors knew them best. Mike Smith checked in on them during his morning walks. He lives in Red Fox Hills that butts up against the strand of riparian forest along the ditch. He told me he was a raptor junkie. "If you've ever been stared at by an owl it tends to just rivet you in place, seeing those enormous eyes boring a hole right through you," Smith said. "They are neat animals. They are wonderfully adapted in so many ways to making a living out here. There are a lot of them around Boulder and Colorado but they've been out here for so many years in this one tree, nesting and raising their young year after year. These guys have turned into Colorado's most famous owls."

"Riveted in place," that's a great way of describing the way it felt to look into the eyes of an owl. They have an incredible ability to stare, to remain stock still. I guess that explains why plastic barn owls fool other members of their own species.

As I videotaped the owls, I would eventually get a blink and know they were real. It wasn't fast like a human, more like the curtain of a camera lens closing at a slow shutter speed. I'd get further proof they were real when a sound would prompt a head to turn on an invisible axis. A freaky swivel that could practically go a full 360 degrees.

It wasn't just the owlets that were worth watching. I loved spotting Mom or Dad. There was almost always a parent on a nearby tree keeping an eye on their little charges. It was fun to study the adults to see what the owlet's fuzz would become. The babies were mostly shades of light gray with texture that looked like sheep's wool that was half spun into cashmere. The parents had whimsical horizontal brown dashes across tawny chests while their backs might as well have been tree bark. Various shades of brown and gray swirled in patterns that fooled me into thinking I was looking at the skin of a cottonwood. Their stillness made it hard to pick out the bird from the branch.

I once saw a parent return with a meal. It dined first while perched on an adjacent tree branch before fluttering over to the hollow to regurgitate a mushy meal of ground rabbit into eager beaks.

When the owlets got older, they'd flutter and hop, testing wings and toes as they expanded their world to the branches of the trees that lived next door. The babies grew and the weather warmed, making it harder to spot the owlets and definitely harder to photograph them. The foreground of my frame was splattered with bright green spots as the cottonwoods sprouted new life of their own. Eventually, I gave up and wished them a happy life.

People who live near the old nest say they still hear owls hooting and see them hunting in the early morning. The next generation of great horned owls will soon fledge, perhaps in the same stand of woods, certainly in various places around Boulder County.

I'm sad I won't get to see them up close at such a scenic, accessible spot. It was a rare privilege to witness baby owls transform from fluff to feather, to look into shimmering eyes and spot a silhouette of tufted ears against a cobalt sky.

I have a hole in my heart after the loss of that old, nurturing cottonwood, but I'm grateful for the window into nature that it shared with so many of us.

See a [video of the owlets](#).