

'Adult' owl turns out to be a big baby

Published in the Janesville Gazette - June 17, 2005

By James Davison
Gazette Staff

The retired Janesville firefighter thought the owl was injured.

He didn't know what was wrong with it, but he knew the best course of action was to leave the bird undisturbed at its location in the woods near Lake Koshkonong .

"It was hopping around-the biggest bird I've ever seen," Terry Sheridan said. "I don't know anything about owls."

What Sheridan assumed was an injured adult turned out to be a healthy baby great horned owl that was likely only a few weeks old.

Shortly after spotting the bird, Sheridan left the area to do Internet research and contact people who might know more.

He soon found that babies grow to the size of their parents just six to seven weeks after being hatched.

Upon returning later that day with his son Terry and 6-year-old grandson, Scott , Sheridan realized "it was definitely a baby, but it was a big baby," he said with a chuckle.

Dianne Moller, owner of Hoo's Woods Raptor Center , said in the first two months, baby great horned owls can grow as fast as an inch per day.

She said although they quickly grow too large for their nests to hold them, resulting in a fall to the ground, they stay in the care of their parents throughout the summer.

"When they (leave) their nests, they're usually on the ground for about a week, flying very short distances," Moller said, adding that 70 percent of great horned owls die in their first year of life.

"I get a lot of calls from (people) who think they are injured," she said. "If you can approach it, it's either young and has not learned to fear humans, or it's injured."

Moller said the best actions for those who are concerned about an owl are to call the Department of Natural Resources or an avian rehabilitator and to not get too close.

"There is no tame wildlife," she added.

Despite Moller's advice, the experience for Sheridan, who said he hears owls frequently while deer hunting but has never seen one, was "awesome. It is just a magnificent bird."

"I went up a couple days later and as far as I know, he's survived," he said. "Every time I go up there I hear an owl hooting and I just hope it's him."

Great horned owls are the most common owl in Wisconsin , Moller said. Adults average 27 inches in height and

3 to 4 pounds, she said.