



9-30-1976

Sexual imprinting of a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) on humans

Robert L. Smith

Arizona State University, Tempe

Eugene F. Olsen

Education Department, Phoenix Zoo, Phoenix, Arizona

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn>

Recommended Citation

Smith, Robert L. and Olsen, Eugene F. (1976) "Sexual imprinting of a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) on humans," *Great Basin Naturalist*: Vol. 36 : No. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn/vol36/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western North American Naturalist Publications at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Basin Naturalist by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

SEXUAL IMPRINTING OF A BARN OWL (*TYTO ALBA*) ON HUMANS

Robert L. Smith¹ and Eugene F. Olsen²

ABSTRACT.—The sexual imprinting of a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) on humans is reported.

In his book on the subject, E. H. Hess (Imprinting, early experience and the development of attachment. Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York 1973, 712 pp.) refers to sexual imprinting on humans in only one species of owl, the Eagle Owl (Heinroth, O., and M. Heinroth. Die Vögel Mitteleuropas. Bermühler, Berlin. 1924-1933, 4 vols.) of the Old World. Here we report an instance of sexual imprinting on humans in the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*).

"Simon," a male barn owl, was acquired as a ca one-week-old chick by the Phoenix Zoo on 12 March 1974. The chick was reported to have fallen from a nest in a palm tree on a residential lot in Glendale, Arizona. He was donated to the zoo by the patron who found him. The bird had no intraspecific contacts after it was acquired by the zoo and was hand fed and handled by one of us (Olsen) from its acquisition date until this writing. Simon began responding to his handler with soft chirping vocalizations at approximately 2.5 months of age. This response has continued to the present.

In mid-March of 1975 the bird began showing overt sexual behavior directed to-

ward human handlers, particularly Olsen. This behavior took the form of repeated attempts by the owl to assume a copulatory posture on the arm of its handler. Typically, the bird would loosely clasp a fold in the handler's shirt with its beak, squat with its tarsometatarsi flattened against the handler's arm, its tibiae bent against the tarsi (Fig. 1). While postured, the owl flapped its wings lightly and repeatedly pressed its tail against the handler's arm. Duration of the posture rarely exceeded 10 seconds, but it recurred as frequently as 10 times in as many minutes of handling. The intensity of this behavior peaked in late May and diminished thereafter until the end of June, by which time it was completely extinguished.

Presumably, the owl as a chick had had considerable interactions with its parents and perhaps siblings during the first week of its life. Early parental exposure, for a precocial species, would almost certainly have insured the release of sexual behavior only in response to an appropriate stimulus object. Apparently the barn owl, being nidicolous, has a longer and/or later critical period to learn its sexual releaser.

¹Department of Zoology, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85281.

²Education Department, Phoenix Zoo, Phoenix, Arizona 85010.



Fig. 1 Barn owl in copulatory posture on arm of handler.