

# A False Nest for Future Generations

Meghan Hatch and Christina Carrières

Like other owls, Great Horned owls are opportunistic when it comes to nest and nest site selection. In fact, they do not build their own nest, but rather re-use those abandoned by other birds such as eagles, hawks, herons, crows and ravens. In some cases, these nests are not in great condition and can fall apart from wind and wear; sometimes this happens while the owlets are still in the nest.

This was most likely the case when nearly a year ago, a concerned citizen came across three Great Horned owlets huddled on the ground in North Saanich. Unfortunately, one had succumbed to its injuries, but the other two were bright and alert, and immediately transported to BC SPCA's Wild ARC. Despite the long fall, the owlets were

in fairly good condition, suffering only from some bruising and dehydration.

The wildlife rehabilitation team at Wild ARC performed a complete physical examination and, given their condition, the young owls were administered rehydration fluids and hand fed mice to ensure that their nutritional needs were met. Whenever possible, Wild ARC staff will attempt to reunite babies with their parents, especially for species needing extensive parental care to learn critical skills such as hunting for prey. In this case, the owlets were healthy and staff decided to attempt reuniting the family. In order to do so, Wild ARC volunteers were deployed to the nest site to see if the parents were still in the area.

Once it was confirmed that the parents were present, the second step to the re-nesting process was put into motion.

Since the original nest was no longer viable, a substitute needed to be built for the owlets to be returned high up into a tree where the parents could care for them. A wicker basket was chosen for its natural properties and to ensure good drainage during rainfall. Jeff Krieger, from Alternative Wildlife Solutions, offered to help in this process by climbing up a suitable tree to secure the nest between large fir branches. The babies were then placed in a kennel tied to a rope and were hoisted up to the false nest by Krieger, who delicately transferred the owlets into their new nest. For the next couple of hours, Krieger, a staff member and a volunteer, moved away from the nest tree, but kept a sharp eye on the babies while waiting for the parents to return. Recognizing the calls of their young, both adults approached the presence of this new feature in the tree and, by the time the sun set, the family was back together. The young owls thrived on the care from their parents and successfully fledged from their false nest a few weeks later.

Wildlife rehabilitation is in part treating injured and orphaned wild animals, but in many cases, the care they need is simply to find a safe way to return them to their parents. This was a very successful story, but like many stories, it wasn't quite the end for the adult pair. Remember how owls will re-use other



Looks a little fancy for us, but we'll take it. Dan Takahashi photo

birds' nests? In this case, they re-used this human-made one. Great Horned owls are early nesters and in March 2017, a hiker noticed that the Great Horned owls had returned to the wicker nest to

rear their new brood. This is a unique case where Wild ARC not only helped these fallen owlets, but also helped the future generations of Great Horned owls in the area.



Two lucky rescued owlets at Wild ARC. Christina Carrières photo

## The Cinnabar Moth (*Tyria jacobaeae*) vs Tansy Ragwort

Moralea Milne

If you see brilliant red flashes of what appears to be a butterfly cruising low over the ground, you've actually seen the increasingly common cinnabar moth. As I write this in late May, you can find a large number of them flying in the open fields by Pedder Bay Marina and as the season progresses you will find their distinctive caterpillars on their host plant, tansy ragwort.

In 1962, cinnabar moths were introduced to Abbotsford as part of a three-pronged (or three invertebrate) approach to combat the introduced and invasive tansy ragwort, along with the flea beetle (*Longitarsus jacobaeae*) and the ragwort seedfly (*Hylemya seneciella*). From Abbotsford, the weed made its way to Vancouver Island, although I have been unable to determine if it spread on its own, or was intentionally introduced (which seems more likely).

The adult female moths lay multiple eggs on tansy ragwort and the resulting orange and black striped caterpillars will completely defoliate the plants, often causing the plants to die over winter. Unfortunately, the abundance

of caterpillars on single plants or within small clusters will result in them eating themselves out of house and home and if they are not able to find alternate plants nearby, they will starve. Sometimes, even though the plants have been well chewed, they will attempt a later flowering, resulting in some seed dispersal. That's where the "Three Musketeer" approach comes into play as the root-eating larva of the flea beetle and the seedfly join forces to further decimate the plant.

Red and orange in the insect world denotes the very real danger of poisoning if insects with these colours are ingested. The cinnabar caterpillars consume tansy ragwort, which has high concentrations of toxic alkaloids (the same alkaloids that potentially poison grazing animals), thus reducing their palatability to some predators. However, it appears there are a number of insect species that do readily consume these juvenile moths, including ants, carabid beetles and spiders. As if predation by many insects is not enough to give a young caterpillar nightmares, apparently when food supplies are scarce, they are not above a little cannibalism. When you




If you see this on a tansy ragwort plant, leave it to do its work. Moralea Milne photo

look closely into the workings of Mother Nature, there is a lot of tough love going on!

A concern has been raised that the introduction of cinnabar moths, with their toxic properties, might be having a detrimental effect on our native alligator lizards. As so often happens when we meddle with nature, our best intentions sometimes have unintended consequences.

If you find tansy ragwort plants with cinnabar moth caterpillars, you might want to leave them standing; they are helping to reduce the tansy ragwort infestations that are a very real risk to the health of our horses, sheep, cattle, and deer populations.

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