

Screech Owls 2020 – Two Failed Nest Attempts

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Last year about this same time (late June), I wrote an article entitled *Screech Owls in Suburbia* describing our (their) success in raising four chicks. This year we, 2020, had another pair but with quite different results. All material, from this year and last, including 98+ videos for 2020, is available as links from <http://crcamp.com/owls>.

I had so much fun last year (and learned a lot along the way) that I decided to improve the setup before anyone new showed up by adding a nest cam in each box. The intent was that *if* they came back in 2020, I wanted to capture what was going on in the box on a continual non-intrusive basis rather than by getting a ladder out, opening the side of the box up (thereby scaring off the attending mother and frightening the kids) and snapping a quick photo of a non-natural event in their life.

So after a lot of dithering and spec sheet reading I finally settled on the *Birdhouse Spy Cam Hawk Eye HD* from Amazon.



It's a color camera with built-in Infrared (IR) lighting that switches on automatically in the dark. It's 1.75" x 1.75" x 1" and fits nicely in the corner of the two owl boxes I have. I bought the first one in May, 2019 and discovered that it puts out standard Audio/Video via RCA jacks so I had to also order a *Hauppauge 610 USB-Live 2 Analog Video Digitizer* that would allow me to record movies or snapshots onto my laptop.

The downside of the nest cam is that I took almost no photographs inside the box and few outside. But I did record and upload a *lot* of videos (with audio) of behavior that I had *NO* idea was happening during courting and incubating although I'm sure it happened in 2019 as well. But, obviously, almost all of it happens at night and without the IR camera it would be invisible. Things began on New Year's eve at 4am, I was reading and became aware that I was hearing a [familiar trill](#) (the weird gurgling background noise is a fountain running).

We had an owl! But it could only be heard. Based on my understanding of the annual pattern I'm guessing that this was the male (we named him Curious George or just George for short).

Two days later we noticed there was an owl head watching us from the front nestbox. It quickly ducked back in but then at 5pm it was on the side box watching us through the kitchen window and trilling every 30 seconds or so. It watched me walk up and down the front walk; watched an Amazon Prime delivery and then the delivery person and me talking for a few minutes. Then watched me walk back into the house.

The next day, the 1st, I waited until it was in the side box late in the afternoon and I sneaked the ladder around to the front box to make sure it was empty. I clattered the ladder up to the tree and scabbled on the side of the box on the off chance we had two and to give anyone inside a chance to vacate. Nothing. I pulled the latching pin out and eased up the side door and was startled to see the *back* of a much larger reddish owl. It moved a little when the door went up, I only saw the back side, and I gently eased the door back down and put the pin back in. It stayed in the box.

Soooo We apparently had both a red morph and a gray morph in our boxes. Based strictly on behavior and based on the way the side owl is comfortable with and interested in us walking around the kitchen, I believe it's the same male we had last year. But the one in front is new! With the apparent size difference and the fact that the front box was where the nesting took place last year, it was pretty obvious that it's the female inside.

A couple of days later, taking a chance that it was empty, I got all the cabling for the front-box camera buried and protected from squirrels and it looked pretty good. The yellow streak in the center is where sun is shining through the opening. I could see the entire bottom of the box and it wasn't any too soon – that night, while I was testing the IR camera, the male dropped in to



practice his call. He starts off with a [barking sound](#) that gradually gets faster and faster until it turns into the trill we're used to hearing. Sort of like an opera soprano warming up her throat. It sounded really loud, but that's because the microphones are in the box with the camera.

For about a week they alternated boxes off and on but then gradually the red morph took over the front box. Oddly, under IR she looks almost like an albino, but in daylight she's as [russet as she can](#) be. The female, who we named Hunter, spent a lot of time [redecorating and clearing mulch out of the bottom of the box](#) down to the lumber floor when she wasn't out hunting. She may have been just looking around but sometimes it looked like she was [aware of the camera](#) as a 'thing' in her home - but everything I've read and researched says at the most it would appear as a dark dull red if it was visible at all. She was probably just bored and checking everything out.

Hunting wise, two or three times a night, George will bring her a grub or a Katydid or sometimes a [gecko](#) (the size variation and IR coloration of the two owls sexes is really apparent in this clip – she's the large white one). If she's not there, he'll [hang around calling for her](#) – but if she shows up, he bails pretty quickly. She usually snatches whatever he brings right out of his beak and snarfs it down. But occasionally she will refuse it - about half way through this [2-minute video](#), he brings what looks like a piece of flattened rat road-kill. She is absolutely not interested and although he tries several times to get her to take it, he finally hauls it off. She's very protective of the nest though and continues to shuffle stuff around. [Hunter's first egg](#) showed up on February 27, 2020.

At this point, she stopped hunting and pretty much sat on the four eggs which arrived one every other day. She depended on George to bring [several food drops nightly](#). She only left the nest at dusk and every 3-4 hours until dawn for nightly potty-breaks, staying away 15-20 minutes each time and checking the eggs out when she returned before settling down on them. All this time, George has been spending days on an oak branch almost invisible in a cluster of leaves. He takes off at night but spends the days within about 15 feet of the nest, facing it to watch? By April 10, the eggs were over due by a week.



On April 11th, when she was out on her dusk potty-break, I raided the nest to check on the egg conditions. One was definitely broken and had oozed yolk onto the other three. I removed the broken one and returned the other three to the nest after adding another handful of mulch to get them up off the hard lumber floor. Hunter came back about 7:20, hopped in and immediately and somewhat frantically hopped back out - I'm guessing she was startled by the new king-sized bed in her house. She went over to a nearby tree-limb and watched me come out and look for her. After another 10 minutes or so she tried again and immediately settled down on the three good eggs. Candling the bad egg showed it was ¼ full of a watery fluid.



The next time I saw her, it was about 10am on Easter morning. One of the eggs had been separated from the other two and was way over in a diagonal corner opposite the other two she was sitting on. She didn't sit on it or pay any attention to it all day. After she left that evening, I opened the box and snagged that egg, intending to candle it as well. No need. It was just an empty shell - no fluid, no meat. Nothing. It was definitely not like that last night when I put the three back in the box. I'm wondering if she ate it.

I candled one of the other two eggs and it appeared to be half opaque and half translucent. None of the detail I was expecting. Don't know what that means. In any case, she was busy sitting on the remaining two, turning them every couple of hours and acting like they are going to hatch. Given that it's been 39 days since they were laid and the average hatch time is 26-30 days, I doubted it.

On the 15th I [removed the remaining two eggs](#) and candled them – both were the same ¼ full of watery liquid and I destroyed them. Hunter noticed the two eggs were gone immediately, rooted around for a very short while then settled in. She continued to return to the nest box during the day for a couple of days and then was gone. The last I saw of her was

on the 20th. Both she and George had disappeared and I figured it was over. A small swarm of Scout Bees invaded the box the next day and hung around for a couple of days. They left when I propped the side door open.

But... on April 23rd Hunter and George both showed back up again and we started all over. I guess a clutch lost to predators (me in this case) is not uncommon and there was still time for a second try.

It was the same pattern as before with three eggs this time being laid on the 4/27 through 5/1. The first egg arrived on April 27 (exactly one month after the 1st clutch) after lots of lovey-dovey sessions with George, a last inspection by both of them and absolute dervish-like frenzies of nesting behavior.

George continued to hang around on his branch and bring food, but it seemed to me like not as much as before and she was definitely out hunting at night for 1-3 hours at a time. Another change is that she's liking the rats that George brings now. George visits occasionally while she's out and checks out the eggs like "What the hell are these?"

During the day she sleeps mostly except for turning the eggs occasionally and, once, scaring something off. During the day she sometimes makes odd vocalizations. They seem to occur more frequently as time goes on and the eggs, again, don't hatch on schedule. She begins staying away more often as if she's aware that the eggs may be bad or damaged.

Hunter left the nest on June 3 when she left on her first dusk potty-break of the evening and never came back.

On the 6th, when she'd been off the eggs for three days, I candled the three eggs and all were half filled with a stiff gel. I destroyed them (again) and cleaned out/hosed down the nest box next day.

There was a huge ant nest under the mulch in one corner - lots of eggs, pupa and small ants that I terminated with extreme prejudice. I'll do a good dusting with Diatomaceous Earth next time and go back to a thin layer of mulch.

I was really looking forward to raising a clutch of baby owls and seeing what went on during their day and nights as they fed. And how many were red morph vs gray morph. And other stuff. But nope. They gave it a good 2nd try but whatever was wrong with the 1st batch was also wrong with the 2nd batch. Maybe it was their first try at nesting and they didn't know the ropes. Maybe it was the weather. Maybe one or both of them ate something that damaged them reproductively. Maybe they were sterile to begin with.

No one will likely ever know and I'll give it another try next spring.