



WILDLIFE RESCUE

A teenager races against
time to return baby owls
snatched from the wild.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIEL J. COX



Who goes there? An adult snowy owl—the most powerful owl in North America—doesn't like humans invading its space.



After feeding the owlets their fill of lemmings (top left), Nuk and Mr. Holt race back to the nesting site.

Two all-terrain vehicles bumped and splashed across the Alaskan tundra. Mounds and puddles stretched for miles, and going was slow. Nuk Harcharek, 14, was in front, hoping he could find the spot again. Biologist Denver Holt followed with their precious cargo—three young snowy owls.

He hoped it wasn't already too late.

Found in the Tundra

Three days earlier, Nuk and two friends—Jonas Ahsoak and Jens Hopson, both 15—had gone duck hunting near their Barrow, Alaska, homes. As they crossed the tundra in their ATV's, they spied three young snowy owls.

"It wasn't very smart, but we decided to take them home and raise them," Nuk said.

The chicks were four or five weeks old, about the size of footballs and covered with fluffy gray feathers. Two chicks went in a bag; Jens put the other under his jacket. When the boys got to Jonas's house, they put the birds in

an empty footlocker and fed them caribou meat.

The next morning, Jonas's mother, Eunice Akpik, noticed a stick holding the footlocker lid open. She yelped when she saw the owls, and quickly slammed the box shut. "What did those boys do now?" she grumbled.

After scolding Jonas, she called a veterinarian. The vet picked up the chicks, made some phone calls and eventually took the birds to Denver Holt. Mr. Holt is a wildlife biologist and president of the Owl Research Institute in Montana. He was spending the summer in Barrow studying—you guessed it—snowy owls.

Chowing Down

First, he fed the babies food their parents might give them—lemmings (mouselike rodents) and pieces of duck. Then Mr. Holt located Nuk, who volunteered to help return the birds to their nest.

"But we had to do it right away," Mr. Holt said. "With their chicks gone, the parent owls might leave the area."

Nuk found the nest site, but as Mr. Holt feared, the owl parents were nowhere in sight.



Adult owls keep watch as Nuk and Mr. Holt place the owlets in a crevice to keep them out of the wind.

A Flash of Wings

"I have an idea," said Mr. Holt, who knew that if the parents were nearby they would come quickly if they saw their babies' wings flash. "Let's chase these chicks around to get their wings flapping."

The chicks flapped. And with the black-and-white pattern of the wings acting as a signal, the owl parents soared in within a minute.

While the adult owls swooped and scolded, Nuk helped Mr. Holt band the babies, allowing Mr. Holt to identify them for later study. Then they set the chicks free. Soon, the parents were bringing food.

"Great," said Mr. Holt. "Now let's leave them alone."

Don't Mess With Wildlife

Nuk enjoyed being part of the rescue and was relieved that he hadn't gotten into big trouble. He also learned a valuable lesson—don't mess with wildlife.

And he was happy about the rescue for another reason: "Those baby owls would have been a real pain to take care of," he said. 🍀

TAKE NOTHING BUT PICTURES

Most people venturing outdoors will eventually come across wild animals that appear injured or abandoned. Usually, say wildlife experts, the best course of action is to do nothing. Here are guidelines wildlife officials often suggest:

- **Don't assume young animals have been abandoned.** Their mother (or even both parents) may be nearby. For example, female deer often bed down away from fawns so they don't attract attention to the babies, and adult birds may be absent from the nest because they're off finding food for the young.
- **Don't touch wild animals.** It is O.K., however, to put baby birds gently back in their nest if they have fallen out.
- **Don't hang around.** Take a few pictures if you like, then leave the animals alone.
- **Don't ever take wildlife babies home to raise.** Wild animals require much more care than dogs or cats. Many species never become tame. What's more, taking wildlife home is often illegal.

If you find an injured animal or know for sure that a young animal's parents are dead, call wildlife authorities and let them handle it.