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Berkeley owl chick will soon branch out, says expert

April 26, 2012 3:33 pm by [Tracey Taylor](#)



The Great Horned Owl chick in its nest on the Claremont Canyon fire trail on April 24. Photo: Lee Aurich

The owl chick that has been drawing crowds of fascinated adults and children to Berkeley's Claremont Canyon trail, where its parents made a nest in a Eucalyptus tree some weeks ago, will

soon began to “branch out” and explore its surroundings before making its first flight, says Doug Bell, Wildlife Program Manager at [East Bay Regional Parks](#).

Great Horned Owls are unusual among raptors in that they go through this development phase which involves “branching”, namely scrambling around nearby branches using a particular legs and wings action. The explorations can get the chicks into trouble, said Bell, as they might get clumsy and fall out of the tree.

Bell urges people who are visiting the Claremont trail to keep their distance and be respectful of the owls and their chick. “We would encourage people to give them space and to keep their dogs on leash,” he said.

The photos taken here, on April 17 and 24, by Lee Aurich, show the nestling being fed by its mother. When it is about 50 days old the chick will begin making short flights on its own and sourcing its own food. It is likely to stay close to its parents and nest for up to two months after that, before taking off for a life of independence.



Mother owl brings food for its chick in the nest on the Claremont Canyon fire trail. Photo: Lee Aurich

In the meantime, the parent owl — and this is usually the mother who is the traditional defender in the raptor world, not least because she is larger than the male — will become even more defensive of its young. “As the chick gets older the mother is more invested in its resource,” said Bell. “She is more motivated to protect it.” The perimeter of defense will also expand as the chick begins venturing from the nest.

Bell has seen Great Horned Owls diving down and hitting dogs, and incidents of swooping have been reported by Berkeleyside readers.

The owl is juxtaposing dogs in its mind with coyotes or other threatening animals, according to Bell. “It doesn’t realize the dog is not a threat,” he said.



After lunch, April 17: the bundle at the left of the chick appears to be leftovers from another meal. Photo: Lee Aurich

The fact that the Great Horned Owls have chosen such a highly trafficked area in which to build their nest suggests they are accustomed to life in the Bay Area, Bell said. “They are used to humans here. They wouldn’t be as tolerant in wilder areas. That’s a plus because it means they can survive; but it’s a minus because it means they can get into more trouble, with both humans and dogs.”

Today, reader Antonio Rossmann contacted Berkeleyside to say that the EBRP signs alerting trail walkers to the presence of owls had been removed. After we alerted EBRP, staffer Jeff Manley, who looks after Sibley, Claremont Canyon and Huckleberry Botanic, went to the trail and replaced the signs with more robust versions. “We have used plexiglass rather than laminated paper this time,” he said. Manley did not know why the signs had been removed.



A parent owl stands guard about 150' up the trail, watching the nest on April 24. Photo: Lee Aurich