

The beginning

It must have been beginning of March on a Sunday when I received an email from Chinmayi saying that she is taking care of a baby Eagle. When I phoned her a little later she told me that she had found the baby bird on her doormat covered in mud. The dog had brought it in and had been playing with it.



As I was passing by her house later on my way from Pondicherry I dropped in to have a look at this little bird. Chinmayi was feeding it small guppies which she had caught in her ant channel. Forcing it into her beak at first. But then the will to survive kicked in and eating was no more a problem. And then I saw that it was a baby Spotted Owlet. A week later I passed by again to take a few photos.

It was end of April when Chinmayi asked if I could take care of their Owl as she and family were going to Germany for 2 months. "Yeah why not". Beginning of May the little Owl arrived in a big cage. She had been rattling on the bumpy roads in a noisy truck for half an hour to reach my house and she looked distraught and frantic.

A small tin with minced beef came with it to feed it twice a day.

Looking at the small unhappy bird flying against the wire because she was so ill at ease in the new environment I remembered Chinmayi's words that their intention was to release her back into nature when she was ready.

The first days Lil had to get used to my presence. I could feed her but this was accepted with uneasiness and caution. Meanwhile I was wondering how to determine when she would be ready to go back into the wild. How to know if she can fly? I started to take her into the living room in the evenings so she could try out her flying skills. And while I was going about my business: eating, reading, working on my laptop; Lil was flying her first distances. Lots of flapping and gaining height as well. From the chair to the top of the stairs, to the table, the fan, the kitchen counter. And then she landed on my shoulder. A first contact was made.



Hunting

The wish to get Lil back into nature was my motivation to ask an expert from Pondicherry to come and have a look at her. He will be able to tell if she is ready. Arriving in the pouring rain without a raincoat, he stands there. Drying himself with a towel looking a little lost.

Peering beyond the curtains which drape Lil's cage during the day, he sees that all the flight feathers are in place and that she is fit to fly out. "You only have to teach her how to hunt." Tree frogs he mentions specifically. "Ok, no problem".

Catching two tree frogs in the pottery I, very clever, tie a piece of string on one of their hind legs. Ange's idea: If you let the frogs jump in your living room and they jump behind the furniture you will lose them. You have to give Lil the time and opportunity so her hunting instincts can emerge. Like this you can always pull the frogs back into the center of attention.

All ready. Evening time. Lil is flying in the living room and is especially playful this evening. Pounces on imaginary prey on the floor, plays with her old kitchen towel which she tears to shreds and flies around with it, clutching it in her claws. Then she sits on the floor looking at things, and I introduce her to the frog. She is very curious and comes close and peers down. Before she has a chance to determine what to do with it, the frog sensing danger takes big leaps and jumps under the sofa. Lil is startled. Ok no problem... pulling on the string. No movement. I pull harder and still no movement. The frog has enormous suction pads under his feet and tries his level best to cling to life.

And when I keep pulling he starts to scream. Ear splitting and heart rending. No idea that frogs can make such loud and penetrating sounds. It's horrible and he does not stop. Howling in misery and protesting his torture.

Lil scared out of her wits flies to the top of the stairs. She hides and does not show herself for the next hour. Hurriedly I take up the frogs cut the string and let them jump to freedom. So much for hunting....



First night out

Lil was set free on Friday evening. She was out the full night. In the beginning she stayed close to her cage and explored the opening. Going in and out of the cage a few times.

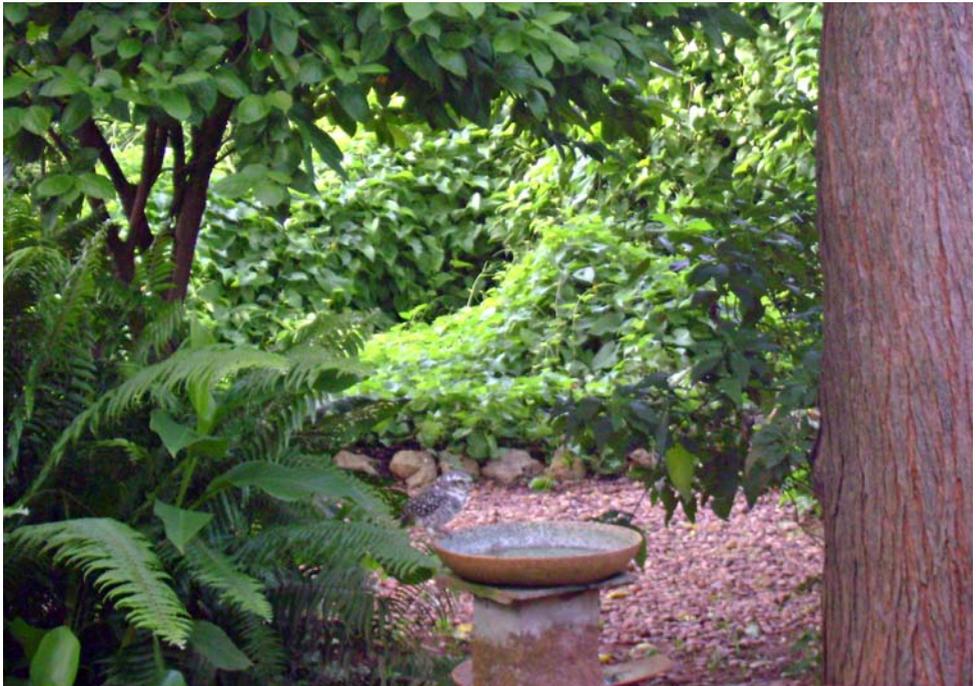
Then staying close to the veranda she practised her landing skills on unfamiliar surfaces. Skidding on a smooth plastered surface and landed on her bum on the pebbles 2 ft below looking bedraggled.

Or flying against a cement pillar where contrary to what her instincts told her there was no bark surface to sink her claws in. Landing on too thin a branch which did not support her weight and down she went flapping her wings.

Landing from time to time on a newly discovered spot: the top of my head “ououch” Then flying around the house exploring the territory. Where in the morning she readily came back to her cage for food as her hunting skills still have to be developed.

Very tired. I closed the cage for a well deserved rest. Then later in the day she looked ill at ease. Either so completely sore with muscle pain that she did not want to move an inch. Or eaten something disagreeable. Sitting with eyes closed, very quiet. Too much of a good thing? So she stayed inside last night to recover.

Today she seems better so out she goes again tonight.



Into the wild?

For Lil the cage is her home. A safe haven in times of threat. When things gets dicey she shrieks a little and flies straight into her cage. Or after a long night out she goes into her cage. First looks around cautiously to see if no intruder has take over her place. Then eats voraciously. Starts preening her feathers, her eyes getting smaller and smaller until overcome with tiredness they shut down and she stands on one leg. Sleeps.



Last evening she seemed especially lively and at ease. And instead of exploring the vastness and strangeness around her she played around on the terrace. Hunting little insects. Landed on my head or shoulder. Played a little with my hair or the strap of my t-shirt. Hopped around the cage. Flew on the table to play with my glasses. And off again into the garden to return very soon to continue this frolicking around. Very much a pet animal not interested to go into the wild at all.

Just like us humans clinging to our cages. To what is safe and known. Unwilling to open up to Unknowing. And it might be true that somewhere we all long to come back to the original state of Oneness and Wonder; but who is willing to leave all and everything?, Something so simple and so close. And yet so remote. Hiding in plain view. How strange it all is,

Ah well 'Oneness playing hide and seek ' :-)



Close encounters

Lil is out a little while. It is 6.20 pm so still daylight. She sits with me a little and suddenly she is off. Out in between the coconut trees she makes a, what seems like an ungainly swoop in her flight. And lands on the granite pillar which stands in the garden 2 meters high not far from the veranda. Clutching in her claw something bulky and black. "Bravo" Caught in midair. Hunting skills very much alive!

Sitting on the pillar trying to get at whatever it is she caught. Picking at it, turning it around, and not succeeding very much. Meanwhile a whole bunch of Seven Sisters have landed on the trees around the granite pillar. And they brought with them a Golden-Backed Woodpecker. They sit in a proximity of 2 to 3 meters. Looking at each other. The Seven Sisters twittering in their conversational and excited way. While the Woodpecker hops solemnly behind the trunk of the coconut tree and peers cautiously at this strange bird sitting on the granite pillar. Lil is looking around left and right to what must be one of the first close encounters with her kind. But she is seemingly unconcerned and continuous with the task at hand.

But distracted she is. She drops her price catch on the ground and peers at it repeatedly. Wondering probably: 'shall i go down and retrieve it?' Looking left and right again. But she must feel unthreatened because down she goes. Half way down at least sitting on the top. Immediately two Seven Sisters take the vacant place and are then sitting on top of the granite pillar. Looking down on Lil wondering what the heck they are looking at. Very comical. But Lil slowly comes into her power because instead of going down more to catch her prey she flies upward and chases away the two voyeurs, 'How Dare..'

Then a Tree Pie joins the crowd of birds, and this presence is tipping the balance. Too threatening. Lil flies straight into her apartment (formerly called cage) and hides a little. Gaining confidence before flying out again.



Coming in

This morning I hear Lil calling before I get up. Not to me. Her call indicates she has spotted some potential danger. When she sees me stumbling around in the house a little later, switching on lights, flushing of toilets etc. she flies to the granite pillar. Waiting for the action.

Soon she comes down with a grand sweep. Flies into her flat. Eats something quick. Comes out again. And then sits on my shoulder for more than an hour. Very quietly at first. Looking at bird life waking up. Alert but at ease. After some time she starts to preen her feathers. Then with

some soft 'uh uh' sounds she indicates that I can now scratch her head. The one place she cannot reach. With my finger scratching all around while her eyes are closed. And she turns and rotates so the right spots gets its scratch.

When I want to stop with some 'uh uh' sounds she lets me know that she is not finished yet.

When all done she returns the favour. Starts softly pecking at my face, nose, ear, hair, anything what is at that moment in front of her beak.

When all is finished just companionably sitting there as if on a branch with one of her kind.

Not every morning is the same. Sometimes she is so eager she flies against the main door. Hangs on the mosquito screen as if urging me to come out sooner.

Another morning she does not show herself at all until the food is in the cage. She flies in without ado, eats and stays there. Or she eats something and starts playing around a little before turning in. And Sunday morning she did not come at all. Flew out on Saturday evening and only showed up on Monday morning very tired and hungry.



Moving on

Lil is becoming more and more affectionate and focused on me. If i come down in the mornings she flies to the window where I am. When I am in the bathroom she flies to the bathroom window. Then I walk to the kitchen and she flies to the kitchen window. Following me from the outside. And the other night when I could not sleep and sat reading down stairs in stead of flying off and doing her owl thing she noticed I was there and she flew against the door asking me to come out.

Next month I go to Holland for a month and wonder how to arrange with Lil. Is she more attached to her territory? Or to company? And Lil still sleeps in her cage during the day.

Meanwhile Chinmayi and Dirk have come back. They are happy that Lil is doing so well. But are also concerned that when I am gone to Holland she will suffer. And propose that they take Lil back.

Sunday afternoon. I can hear Lil calling early in the afternoon wanting to come out of her cage. For hours she sits with me. Close by or on my shoulder while i read. When Ange passes by I tell her that it will be better for Lil to go back to Chinmayi because she needs people around her who give her company. From the moment I uttered those words Lil ignores me. She does not sit with me but perches seperate on the hanging chair. Or flies out of her cage and away. This goes on for 3 days. I can see that she seems more mature and self contained.

Then on Thursday morning when the thought comes: "Maybe Lil does not need to go to Chinmayi after all because she does not need the company" most amazing, Lil as if reading the thought, flies that moment on my shoulder as if to say: "Yes, I want to stay."

Then I tell Lil: "If you want to stay here you have to stop using your flat because Dirk would like the cage back." From then on Lil is not using the cage anymore. The door of the cage is open, and if she wants, she can go in. But instead she flies out and finds a quiet place in nature to sleep. She still comes back in the mornings to eat some minced beef. Sits with me for an hour or so. Sits on the terrace for another hour before flying away.



New house

This morning the big cage was taken from the veranda to be returned to Dirk and Chinmayi.

And Lil's new house arrived a few hours later. The size of a shoebox, waterproof plywood. All closed with an opening of 10 cm wide. It has a small veranda in front of the opening as a landing strip for incoming flights. It took one hour to hang the small box on the wall as the carpenter first had to repair his drilling machine.



Coming back from the pottery at 4.30 p.m. I was projecting the idea of Lil having to get used to her new flat. And was wondering if she would take to it at all. Usually in the evenings since she sleeps out in nature I see Lil only around 6 or 6.30 pm for 5 or 10 minutes. If at all and she is quickly gone as this is the time for hunting.

I park the bike in the shed and walk onto the veranda. And Lil is already sitting on her landing strip in front of the opening. As I came walking in with a breeze, not expecting her to be there she got startled at first and flew away. But quickly came back.

First very cautious peering inside the box. Again and again. Bobbing her head up and down. Until finally she could trust this new place and stepped inside. For the next two hours she was busy with her new house. At times just sitting in the box in front of the opening. Looking outside for long stretches. At other times walking in and out. Being busily busy inside. Going outside again. Walking in and out again. Then flying from all different angles towards the opening. Again and again. Flying in and out. And then in the end jumping on the roof and on the branches which are attached to the box.

Playing around. Jumping up and down again. She really made it her own. Two hours instead of 5-10 minutes. And then she was off again to do her owly things.



4 th of March 2019

Cautionary note to the story of Lil and what happened next:

Lil lived with me for half a year 9 years ago.

One reason why I have not widely published the story before is the danger that people get so touched by my story that they would like to have their own pet Owl.

From my experience I know that Owls are too sensitive to be kept as a pet.

They bond too intensely.

I know of one case where the pet Owl, who lived in the house, died because the owner had to leave for a few weeks. The Owl simply stopped eating.

Owls are not meant to be pets, and I would not want my story to promote that.

Lil lived with me through chance and I count myself lucky.

Lil was fortunate that she was released in the wild already, and she found a companion soon after I had left for Holland.

She got her own life and lives free.

Hers is a happy ending.