Owl Echoes and Recreation Conservation

BY CONRAD BAKER

It was 5:18 a.m. on a Wednesday in January. The sky was clear, cold, and silent. I was warm in bed, in the “cabin” built for staff at DEC’s Reinstein Woods Environmental Education Center. Something had stirred me. Then I heard it again... who HOO who who...

I glanced up through the blinds. There hung the silhouette of a grand owl, holding the bending arm of a black cherry tree overlooking the parking lot, bowing as she called... who HOO who who. Her voice throbbed in my chest as I lay there. I absorbed every detail: how very far out on the branch she sat; where she looked; how frequently she called; her tone. She called one more time, turned her head to the east, lifted her wings, and vanished.

It was a precious opportunity. Many of us develop professionally in a climate that passively decries the conveniences of urban life as generally poisonous to the earth. It may be that a majority of us only breathe outside air on our walks from the door to our transportation and back again.

It seems to me that fewer and fewer people take long walks outdoors, camp, or fish. Maybe sooner than we think, people will only encounter nature through a huge camera lens in their cars or in a park.

But, there are powerful glimmers of hope if one looks for them.

As I have become more professionally connected to a few nature centers and environmental education centers in Western New York, I have noticed an apparent rising public interest in outdoor recreation. For example, while working last winter at Reinstein Woods—a 292-acre nature preserve with old growth forests, in Cheektowaga—we rented out more than 100 pairs of skis, breaking the previous record of 80.

On another day at Reinstein, I watched a very young explorer lead her dad into the environmental education center. She held his sleeve in one hand and a plastic pair of binoculars in the other. Suddenly, she let go of her father’s arm and sailed over to a superb collection of owl taxidermy.

“Harry Potter’s owl! Baby owls! Spooky owl,” she cried to the snowy, screech, and barred owls, delirious with joy. She stopped at the great horned owl and simply exclaimed “Wow.”

“And,” I began, but she was ten miles ahead of me.

“Do you have this kind of owl here?” she asked.

“Funny you should ask,” I replied, and I pointed to the tree where the owl had just visited me, and told her the tale.

We had a blast hooting like great horned owls, chanting like barred owls, whinnying like eastern screech owls. We blew on the huge great horned owl flight feather, listening for the faintest whisper. We looked through the gnarly carnage of an owl pellet, looking for skulls, ribs, eyes in the regurgitated remnants of the owls’ meals.

My new friend was about six years old. Her father said she grew up in downtown Buffalo and learned about Reinstein Woods when an educator led a program on animal tracks at her school. I was pleased to see that nature still holds appeal, even as it seems to be disappearing. Her starry-eyed enthusiasm for the natural world verified my feelings that the naturally curious can bloom into outdoor enthusiasts, if only given the chance. And perhaps that outdoor enthusiast will become a cross-country skier, a snowshoer, or even an owl.

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