

“Hoo’s”



great horned owl

in the CITY?

Owls of New York City

By Robert DeCandido PhD, and Deborah Allen

Owls are awesome. Where we live in the Bronx, kids say owls are “bad,” which in their parlance means owls are good. In many cultures, owls were considered omens of bad luck and even death. But to the ancient Greeks, owls were associated with wisdom, and a symbol of the goddess Athene. Today, in this age of Harry Potter, owls remain symbols of a wise life, and in at least one Manhattan high school, to receive the “Order of the Owl” is to be bestowed high honors for scholastic achievement.

Yet if we travel back in time to old New York, it is easy to find some of the ire that owls once inspired. In 1900, William Braislin, M.D. recorded an incident in his journal regarding a crowd of school boys armed with stones that had gathered in a vacant lot in Manhattan. In a tree above them was a sleepy barred owl. The boys begin spewing epithets at the bird. According to Braislin, “...even the presence of a policeman had little effect in restraining the boys. In spite of much persecution the owl remained in the



vicinity for several days more, but the commotion and excitement produced by his presence led to his premature end. Various missiles aimed at the owl by the crowd during the day became a menace to the windows and heads, and led the householders to consider the bird a rather unwelcome visitor.” The owl was soon shot by the police.

Through the next half-century, the public’s perception of owls did not change much. A news story in the *New York Times* in 1947 describes a “monkey-face” owl that was “observed by a group of men planting the Stuyvesant Town’s first oak tree, near Avenue C and Fourteenth Street. A crowd collected. Small fry threw pebbles at the bird and hooted derisively. The owl blinked in the sun, then took off. This time it halted on the eleventh floor of one of the development’s unfinished buildings near Fifteenth Street.” Fortunately for this barn owl, it was captured and given to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and presumably released at a later date.

Now fast-forward to October 2000. On a night walk sponsored by the Central Park Conservancy to look for owls in Manhattan's Central Park, more than 100 people gathered, armed only with binoculars. Our footsteps rattled on the dry autumn leaves, alerting any owl to the approach of this curious army. But while we had no luck that night, on subse-

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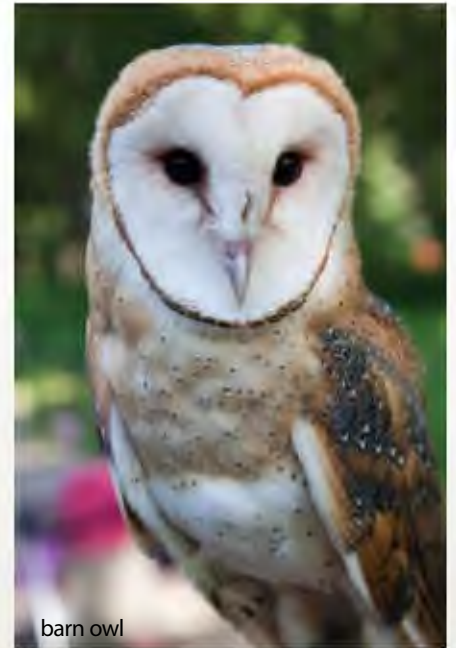
quent night walks we have found eastern screech-owls, barn owls, long-eared owls, great horned owls, saw-whet owls and even a boreal owl. Why do owls find the New York City night life so cool?

The answer is simple: abundant food and diversity of habitats. Through the years, we have learned that New York City is a veritable fast-food joint for birds of prey. The barred owl that was shot in 1900 was roosting by day in a tenement courtyard, feasting by night upon sleeping house sparrows. Today,

our New York City owls, such as the Central Park screech-owls, consume anything that moves, including small to mid-sized mammals and birds, non-native Asian earthworms, moths, lightning bugs, crayfish and even fish. At least 11 owl species (of the 12 that occur in New York State) have been found in New York City since the late

1850s, and three species still nest here. Some, such as the snowy owl, spend November to March hunting non-native ring-necked pheasants at Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx and western black-tailed jack rabbits at Kennedy Airport in Queens. Others, such as the diminutive saw-whet owl, specialize in capturing small rodents such as mice, voles, shrews and young rats.

Each autumn, several New York City parks regularly host groups of up to five long-eared owls. They arrive in mid to late



barn owl

Robert DeCandido

October and remain until early March. Dan Beard, one of the co-founders of the Boy Scouts of America, wrote about their food habits in 1906 in Flushing, Queens: "They breed here, and this last season they wintered here...I have examined a number of their pellets and found in them nothing but the remains of mice with now and then the bones of an English sparrow...The birds roost in the thick foliage of an evergreen tree, but when watched too closely do not hesitate to leave the tree and fly about in broad daylight, and the manner in which they dodge obstructions when approaching their former perch, makes it evident that their eyesight is very good even in daylight." In the past, up to 37 have been counted at one winter roosting site in the Bronx (January 1962). The long-eared owl last nested in New York City on Staten Island in 1947.

The great horned owl has increased in number in the past century, and is the most formidable raptor that nests in our parks. Each year in December, their breeding season begins. At dusk, we have seen the male and then the female fly to adjacent lamp posts in parking lots of city parks. Here they begin hooting back and forth to one another in an eerie duet. By late January some pairs have



saw-whet owl

Robert DeCandido

Eleven species of owls have been seen at one time or another in New York City.

Three of these species—barn owl, eastern screech-owl, great horned owl—still nest here. Two other species—long-eared owl and northern saw-whet owl—are relatively common in the city. The remaining six species are considered rare in the city, with snowy, barred and short-eared owls spotted occasionally, and northern hawk,

boreal and burrowing owls considered extremely rare.

For natural history information about New York's owl species, check out DEC's pamphlet *Owls of New York State* at www.dec.ny.gov/pubs/4791.html and Cornell's *All About Birds* on-line bird guide at www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/search.



great horned owl

Deborah Allen



short-eared owl

Deborah Allen

laid 2-3 eggs, and the first fledglings leave the nest in early April, often before they can fly. Walking by day along woodland paths in the Bronx, we have observed these fledglings. Adults keep watch over them, each night bringing food ranging from rabbits and squirrels to mallard ducks.

Besides the abundant prey base that owls exploit here, there are different habitats that compose New York City; fields, woodlands, salt marshes and even vacant lots are hunted by different owl species. However, these habitats have changed significantly since 1900, benefitting some owl species, while hurting others. For example, the short-eared owl was formerly more abundant when grasslands, open fields, salt marshes and active landfills were scattered throughout the city. However, as many of these areas were developed for housing, or matured into deciduous

woods, this owl became less common, though they are still occasionally seen flying over abandoned landfills in the outer boroughs during winter.

Another owl affected by habitat change is the barred owl which has disappeared as a breeder—it prefers riparian woodlands, a habitat that is uncommon in the city today. On the positive side, barn owls seem to be holding their own despite changes in “natural” areas throughout the city. These owls tolerate human activities by day, and have even nested in openings in the walls of the old Yankee Stadium. By night, they hunt abundant Norway rats in and around apartment complexes in the Bronx and upper Manhattan. Because their food supply is rarely in short supply, barn owls can be found nesting in every month of the year (fledging young even in December-January). The barn owls of the Jamaica Bay (Gateway) National

Recreation area can be found roosting in many of the owl boxes constructed for them. At night, they hunt the salt marshes and remaining fields.

Owls have served as ambassadors of conservation in New York City. In 1929, Grace Coit Meloney, a high school science teacher in the Bronx, wrote that, “Early in the morning of October 31, 1930, a janitor discovered a barn owl, and put it in a scrap basket with a cardboard cover. The owl was banded at a meeting of the Science Club that afternoon and was liberated from the roof by the members. It is not the return records as interesting as they would be to which I look forward in handling these birds, but the excitement and interest that accompany each visit when birds invade our school building. It is the stimulation of the imagination in discussions of banding for scientific purposes, and the idea that some of the

students may later find pleasure in bird-banding and in securing scientific results, or may even bring in reports of banded birds, that seems to me their greatest value.”

Today, a conservation research program is underway to understand how the saw-whet owl, the city’s most common owl in some winters, utilizes an urban park. Saw-whets are present in widely varying numbers; as many as 15 have been found in one large urban park in December, with up to nine roosting in the same small grove of young white pines by day. Trudy Battaly and Drew Panko are leading a team of field biologists from early October to mid March, using radio telemetry to track these owls in order to answer questions that will help ensure saw-whets will always winter here. Questions being investigated include: How long do individual owls stay? Do the same individuals return each year? What are man-made threats to overwintering owls?

A similar conservation-oriented owl program began in Central Park in 1998. In late summer that year, a group of six eastern screech-owls were banded and released into the park, where they had not been seen in more than fifty years. An additional 33 screech-owls were released in subsequent years; the result: owls have bred and raised young once again in Central Park. More importantly, impressive numbers of people turn up with their children at dusk to look for the screechers on “owl prowls.” The public’s interest comes just in time for the screech-owl. It bred in every borough—five different nests were once found in one park alone—but is now only hanging on by a prayer in the city, and is only common, but declining, on Staten Island.

The take-home message is clear: people and owls can co-exist even in busy cities. However, we must take care in the way we use rodenticides in our parks, and leave some hollows in trees

for owls to nest. As observers, we can also inform those in decision-making positions that owls are important to us. There is one thing we have learned through the eastern screech-owl reintroduction project in Central Park: it is much easier to preserve and protect native species already living in our parks than to try and re-establish them once they are gone.

Call them what you will, but we think New York City owls are way cool. That, in kid speak, really does mean awesome.

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Larry Fischer

Because of changing habitat, barred owls no longer nest in New York City.