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# The Owl Comes Into Its Own



S. Avdeyuk/Amur-Ussuri Centre for Avian Biodiversity

Jonathan Slaght released this Blakiston's fish owl near the Sha-Mi River in Russia following capture in 2008. The same owl was struck by a vehicle and killed in 2012.

By NATALIE ANGIER  
Published: February 25, 2013 | 74 Comments

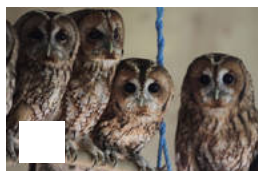
WASHINGTON — The day after a frigid, star-salted night spent tromping through the Alexandria woods with David Johnson of the [Global Owl Project](#), and listening to the stridently mournful cries of wild barred owls that remained hidden from view, I stopped by the National Zoo around sunset to take visual measure of the birds I had heard.

The two barred, or *Strix varia*, owls were just rousing themselves in the outdoor enclosure, and they looked bigger and more shaggily majestic than I expected, with capes of densely layered cream-and-coffee plumage draped on their 17-inch frames and pompous, Elizabethan feather ruffs encircling their necks. Like any good royalty, they ignored me.

That is, until I pulled out my phone with the birdcall app and started playing the barred owl song. The female's languid eyes shot wide open. The male's head spun around in its socket by 180 of the 270 degrees an owl's head can swivel.

With the distinctive forward-facing gaze that can make owls seem as much human as bird, the barred pair stared at me. I played the call again, the male grew bored, and I was

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0:53 **Duetting Pair of Blakiston's Fish Owls**

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Amir Ezer

Barn owls communicate through a complex, rule-based series of calls, trills, barks and hoots, says Alexandre Roulin of the University of Lausanne.

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about to put the phone away when suddenly the female — the larger of the two owls, as female birds of prey often are — pitched her body forward on her perch, lifted up her heavy, magnificent wings and belted out a full-throated retort to my recorded call.

After a brief pause, she hooted the eight-note sequence once more, at which point an astonished zoo-goer nearby burst into applause.

In the Western imagination, the owl surely vies with the penguin for the position of My Favorite Bird. “Everyone loves owls,” said [David J. Bohaska](#), a paleobiologist at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, who discovered one of the earliest owl fossils. “Even mammalogists love owls.”

Owls are a staple of children’s books and cultural kitsch — here wooing pussycats in pea-green boats and delivering mail to the [Harry Potter](#) crew, there raising a dubiously Wise eyebrow in the service of snack food. Yet for all this apparent familiarity, only lately have scientists begun to understand the birds in any detail, and to puzzle out the subtleties of behavior, biology and sensory prowess that set them apart from all other avian tribes.

Researchers have discovered, for example, that young barn owls can be impressively generous toward one another, regularly donating portions of their food to smaller, hungrier siblings — a display of altruism that is thought to be rare among nonhuman animals, and one that many a small human sibling might envy.

The scientists also discovered that barn owls express their needs and desires to each other through a complex, rule-based series of calls, trills, barks and hoots, a language the researchers are now seeking to decipher.

“They talk all night long and make a huge noise,” said Alexandre Roulin of the University of Lausanne, who recently [reported on barn owl altruism in the journal Animal Behaviour](#) with his colleague Charlene A. Ruppli, and Arnaud Da Silva of the University of Burgundy. “We would never put our nest boxes in front of a farmer’s bedroom, or the person wouldn’t be able to sleep.”

Other researchers are tracking the lives of some of the rarer and more outlandishly proportioned owls, like the endangered Blakiston’s fish owl of Eurasia. Nearly a yard high, weighing up to 10 pounds and with a wingspan of six feet, Blakiston’s is the world’s largest owl, a bird so hulking it’s often mistaken for other things, according to Jonathan Slaght of the Wildlife Conservation Society’s Russia program. It could easily look like a bear in a tree or a man on a bridge.

Or maybe Ernest Hemingway. This powerful predator can pull from the river an adult salmon two, three or more times its own weight, sometimes grabbing onto a tree root with one talon to help make the haul.

Ferocity is essential for a bird whose frigid, spotty range extends across northeastern China, the Russian Far East and up toward the Arctic Circle, one that breeds and nests in the dead of winter, perched atop a giant cottonwood or elm tree, out in the open, in temperatures 30 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Dr. Slaght’s colleague Sergei Surmach videotaped a female sitting on her nest during a blizzard. “All you could see at the end was her tail jutting out,” Dr. Slaght said.

Aeronautical engineers are studying owls for clues to better wing designs. Many owl species are renowned for their ability to fly almost completely silently, without the flapping noises and air whooshes that might warn prey of their approach.

Researchers have traced that silent flight to several features. The bulk of the wing is broad and curved — the ideal shape for slow gliding — and is abundantly veined with velvety

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down plumage to help absorb sound. Moreover, the feathers at the edge of the wing are serrated to effectively break up and smooth out air turbulence as a comb disentangles knots. At a meeting of the American Physical Society last fall, researchers from Cambridge University [proposed](#) that well-placed perforations in an airplane wing could have a similar smoothing effect on turbulence, leading to quieter and more fuel efficient flights — and mealtime voles for all.

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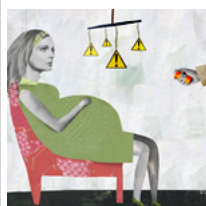


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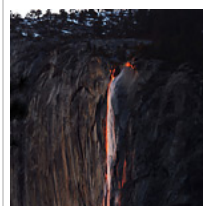


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