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The Owl Outside Our Window

By Mark Travis

My wife and I are accustomed to encounters with wildlife in our yard. In summer, wild turkeys pause, ever alert, as they lift their heads to tug ripe berries from the obstinate bramble at the edge of the woods around our home. In fall, chipmunks with acorns held in bulging cheeks skitter over the stone wall, down through the trees to the creek. In winter, chickadees chitter as they contemplate another lilting flight to our feeder from the leafless branches nearby. One morning a few years back we emerged from the house to find the prints of a bobcat in the dusting of snow on the steps. One afternoon just months ago, Brenda spotted three coyotes trotting in single file along the long hillside that looms beyond the creek, following a game trail we've seen deer take before. For the most part, we keep our distance, these creatures who live outside our house and my wife and me, who live within it. Neighbors of the sort you learn to recognize but never get to know.

So how to explain this exception of a barred owl? Brenda first noticed it one February day two winters back, looking in through our dining room picture window as she looked out. She called me to her side, excitement and wonder in her voice. There it sat, not fifty feet away, motionless, impassive, its eyes meeting ours as it perched on the limb of an oak tree overlooking the yard. It was an impressive sight—maybe two feet tall, with broad shoulders and a full chest, a football coach of a bird, lacking only a whistle around its neck. We recognized it immediately for what it was, thanks to the brown-and-white feather pattern that inspired its name. Its head was softball-sized, a study of rounds within rounds, with concentric feather circles surrounding its dark marble eyes. The circles met in the center of its face, just above the exclamation point of its beak: short, yellow, knife-like. Brenda rushed to the kitchen for her phone and its camera while I went for the bird books; the visitor observed our flurried reaction with perfect composure. I

thumbed my way to “owl, barred” in the index to an old bird guide, then followed its lead to Page 64. There I learned the owl’s formal name—*Strix varia*, member in good standing of the *Strigidae* family—but beyond that, the book seemed to have everything wrong. “This owl is seen only by those who seek it out in its dark retreat,” it said, “usually a thick grove of trees in lowland forest. There it rests quietly during the day, coming out at night to feed on rodents, birds, frogs, and crayfish. If disturbed, it will fly easily from one grove of trees to another.” Brenda took one careful step toward the window with her phone in hand, then another, breathless, and then another, taking a picture with every pause. The owl held its pose, as if it had all the time in the world and nothing much better to do. Occasionally it shifted its gaze to the snow below, but it was never long before it rotated its head slowly in our direction. Its body scarcely moved.

I can’t remember having seen another barred owl in the woods around us, but Brenda and I have long been aware of their presence. I notice their distinctive call as I lie awake in summer with the bedroom window open and all else still: “*Who-who-who cooks for you all?*” Back and forth it goes as another owl, more distant, answers that question from the darkness with its own, as if to say, *First you tell me, who-who-who cooks for you all?* I love it above all other sounds of the night, far more than the yippie-yowls of the coyotes, which, if close enough, raise the hair on the nape of my neck. Once, when I was a younger man, new to life in the woods, I got up from bed and went outside to engage a barred owl in discussion, *who-cooks-for-youing* with great enthusiasm until it lost interest. I wasn’t fluent in owl, had no idea what it was trying to tell me. Now, in my advanced age and stimulated to deeper contemplation by our owl’s daytime appearance, I consulted an expert on all things *Strigidae*: Chris Martin, a biologist and raptor specialist for New Hampshire Audubon. He told me that barred owls often hoot to declare

territorial boundaries. An owl might also call to locate its mate. When they call for their parents, hungry young owls make a different sound altogether, more shriek than hoot. As the conversation turned to our daytime owl, Martin deflated my balloon of exceptionalism with this observation: “The amazing thing in my mind is how few people see them on a daily basis,” he said, “because they’re in almost everyone’s neighborhood practically.” It turns out that barred owls are quite active by day, despite our old bird book’s assertion to the contrary. (As a writer, I’ll just assume it was an editor’s error.) Though ubiquitous, barred owls are also well-camouflaged and so not easily spotted—unless they choose to reveal themselves. The true marvel wasn’t our owl’s presence; it was its boldness.

To Brenda’s amazement and mine, our visitor reappeared in our yard, in our lives, for many days to come. Brenda took to calling it “him” or “he,” while I called it “her” or “she,” revealing a gender bias on both our parts that had no basis in observation. The plumage of an owl conceals many secrets, including its sex, though if ours had perched alongside its mate, we could have settled the matter. Female barred owls are up to a third larger in size than males. Sometimes our owl stayed on for hours, even as we came and went, the garage door rattling up as we headed out on a dump run and rattling down when we returned. And yet its visits remained so novel that each emergence stopped us in the midst of what we were doing and sent us hunting for our phones. Of course we needed another picture; how else to preserve this gift? We posted images to Facebook with an enthusiasm normally reserved for newborns, outrage politics, and kittens falling from chairs.

Brenda and I both love the woods, but in different ways. It’s an odd twist, really: I grew up in the suburbs and relish immersion in nature. Brenda, raised in the country, is relentless in her efforts to tame our setting, to bend it to her will. She mutters over dandelions in the yard;

they belong here too, I mutter back. She chops with fury at ice on the driveway, for safety's sake; I step gingerly around it, trusting to chance. One morning over coffee, we watched for what seemed an eternity as a snapping turtle plodded through a gap in the stone wall toward the overgrown flower bed alongside our house. There it bulldozed its way through the tangle of weeds and the daylilies, presumably searching for a good spot to lay its eggs. Its slow-motion reconnaissance drew us from the house, united by interest but divided over whether this would be a welcome development. In its time the turtle moved on.

We stand together on thwarting the creatures drawn to the raised-bed gardens where Brenda spends her summers. When a family of skunks dened beneath the garage workshop, just a short commute from the compost, I called a trapper who promised to release them safely into someone else's woods. Every August I swallow hard and pluck the plump tomato hornworms from the stalks of the plants that Brenda holds most dear, ending the ravenous ways of what are lovely-Sphinx-moths-to-be by dropping them in a bucket of soapy water. Once a mysterious mound of dirt revealed itself on Brenda's inspection to be a porcupine that was enjoying her beets so much that it lost track of time, forgetting it was nocturnal. Summoned once more to defend the garden's bounty, I confronted the porcupine with care, bristle on bristle, nudging it with a push broom held at full arms' length until it huffed off into the woods.

There was nothing antagonistic or ambivalent in our feelings toward our barred owl, and seemingly in the owl's feelings toward us. One day it opened its wings and dropped into the yard, swooping to a perch atop the bird feeder pole just ten feet outside the dining room window. Its approach was soundless. As predators, owls long ago evolved broad wings with finely fringed feathers that swallow noise as they fly. The owl continued its study of our behavior from its new and much closer position, its head rotating as its eyes followed us from dining room to kitchen

and back. This capability too is a product of evolution. An owl's eyes are tubular rather than round on the inside like ours, so they can't move them as we do; instead, they rotate their heads, as if on a dowel, the arteries in their necks having developed to keep blood flowing to their brains as they twist well beyond the point where we'd pass out. When I discovered its head could turn so far as to watch me in the bathroom, I was as embarrassed as if it were the pastor on an unexpected visit. But nothing it observed seemed to disturb the owl very much, because now it adjusted its practice and returned to this new perch day after day. It did declare certain activities on our part to be unacceptable. Every time we opened the door to leave the house, however apologetically, it retreated to the woods; when Brenda, intent on taking the best picture yet, lingered at the dining room window for a moment too long, it did the same. But it trusted us to learn from our mistakes, and always returned. Our feelings for the owl deepened far beyond curiosity and wonder. We came to speak of it with reverence, as our feathered angel, there to save us from late-winter despair.

When it's cold out and snow covers the ground, our bird feeder draws crowds like a five-star restaurant. Chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches descend as a group, out for a morning on the town. Cardinals, ever polite, wait for an open table; blue jays go straight to the front of the line and demand the best seat in the house. Woodpeckers hang out at the suet bar. Squirrels feast on the leftovers that fall to the ground.

When the owl took its perch atop the pole, I expected it to land like a scathing review, driving even our most loyal customers away. They kept coming. Chickadees flitted within inches of the owl and its perch, back and forth, all morning long. Our bright red cardinal and his gray female mate, the most tentative of visitors, hopped about in the snow as always, pecking for fallen seeds. Even the squirrels paid it no mind. The squirrels! Brenda and I said to each other.

What's the point of having an owl as your guardian angel if it can't protect your feeder from the squirrels?

In this thought we revealed ourselves as fully as the owl had. Much as I try to appreciate nature on its own terms, I'm afraid I am prone to thinking of it as something that's here for me. Brenda too. We hang feeders in hopes of attracting creatures we enjoy watching but not those we don't. We plant a garden and insist on being the only ones to harvest it. Outside in summer we present ourselves as food to mosquitoes and deer flies but demand that they leave us be. In my own far more modest way, I'm as guilty of imposing myself on nature as a strip miner. It's a question of degree, which is of course the all-important question, but at the root of all human behavior toward nature is the sense that it's ours. It's not *our* yard, just as it's not *our* Earth. We're all here with and for each other, all creatures, interdependent, for better and worse. Yet nature is unforgiving. In its own way, every creature puts itself first.

In time, at last, our owl revealed its purpose. It had studied Brenda and me to determine if we posed a threat, and once that was settled it went about its business. It ignored the chickadees and the squirrels because they're too hard to catch or too big to kill. It knew exactly what it was after. Twice Brenda and I happened to be watching as the owl dropped its gaze to the seeds scattered in the snow. It tensed. Slowly it raised its wings.

The snow cover late that winter was unusual. The base layer was frozen and crusty. Above it lay several inches of fresh powder. The conditions were perfect for mice and voles to tunnel their way atop the crust but beneath the powder until arriving at the dinner table below the birdfeeder, set with fallen seeds.

I don't believe the owl could see them coming. Its ears, hidden beneath the feathers of its softball head, are unevenly aligned and point in different directions, and that's much to its

advantage. Owls have developed not merely great hearing, but what you might call binocular hearing: They can pinpoint the source of a sound without moving their head.

With one silent flap of its wings, the owl lifted itself from its perch and dropped toward the snow with claws extended. Its talons are sharpened to the same razor's edge as its beak. We watched as the owl flexed those claws in the snow, groping for and then securing its prey in its grasp. With one, two, three beats of its wings, it lifted itself gracefully from the powder and returned to a branch above the edge of our yard, its meal of a rodent dangling helplessly below. A small spot of red in the disrupted snow told the story.

In the grand scheme of things, barred owls are thriving. Their range extends as far west as British Columbia and as far south as Texas. Climate change poses no threat to their kind; in time it may enable them to extend their range well north of Montreal and Quebec City, toward the Arctic Circle. In California they are considered an invasive species. But that's not to say that barred owls have it easy. In the best of times, a pair of barred owl parents will nurture two to four young each season; only half will survive, so difficult are the skills they must master. The winter of our owl visit was the worst of times. During its course, seventy-seven barred owls were brought to the Center for Wild Bird Rehabilitation at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science. That was thirty more than the year before. Many were starving. "They're just not able to punch through the ice to get to prey on their own," their keeper told a reporter. It takes two weeks on a liquid diet before an emaciated owl is able to stomach solid food again. Only fifty-five percent recovered, and the keeper considered this a success.

I would like to think that our owl was as curious about life on our side of the window as we were about its realm in the woods beyond the glass. But then I wonder, what if the situations were reversed? How curious would I be about an owl that kept watch as I dug in the snow for

ground nuts to fend off starvation? Perhaps the owl remembers us, if only for the emergency food supply we offer, and might return in the next of our shivery seasons. Chris Martin told me they are creatures of habit; learn their behavior through observation, and you can predict it. Understanding the straits that brought this owl to us, as I now do, I still hope that we see it again. But that decision—along with the unrelenting challenge of survival, which animates the life that abounds around us—is the owl's alone to consider.