Vol. 85, Nos. 3–4 • Fall–Winter 2023

WISCONSIN SOCIETY *for* ORNITHOLOGY

The *Passenger* PIGEON

Journal of the WISCONSIN SOCIETY *for* ORNITHOLOGY

Great Gray Owl at Sax-Zim Bog, Minnesota. Photo by John Pradarelli.

Sensitive Species: How to Observe and Report Owls

By Karla A. Bloem

International Owl Center
126 E Cedar St, Houston, MN 55943
507-896-6957
karla@internationalowlcenter.org

A Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) that showed up in New Glarus, Wisconsin, in mid-December 2024 was regularly observed and photographed until it died less than two months later, emaciated and with parasites. A first-year male Snowy Owl south of Minneapolis was videotaped in February 2014 giving begging calls around people after repeatedly being fed mice by photographers. These are only two instances of negative impacts to owls from well-meaning observers.

Owls are highly charismatic nocturnal birds of prey but are difficult to observe due to excellent cryptic plumage and the nocturnal/crepuscular habits of most species. Many people, not just birders, would love to see one. So when you find an owl, how can you respectfully observe it and when and how is it appropriate to share your sighting?

As with most things pertaining to owls, there are no hard and fast rules, but rather many things to understand and consider. Each species behaves differently as a whole, each individual is unique, and every situation is different. I have seen Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*) nesting in an urban park that ignored people walking dogs and pushing strollers below them, while a Great Horned Owl nesting in the woods in a rural area flushed off her nest when people laughed audibly inside a turkey blind 50 yards away.

Food stress is a significant issue for Boreal Owls (*Aegolius funereus*) especially, and for Snowy Owls in some years. It is almost impossible to tell which owls are emaciated until they are close to death (the only way to tell is to physically feel their keel bones), so it is important to stress the owls as little as possible while you are observing or photographing them. Here I recommend some tips to help you be a respectful owl observer or photographer.

Northern Saw-whet Owl showing stress: bug-eyed and feathers compressed. Photo by Jeff Grotte.

Northern Saw-whet Owl in relaxed posture. Photo by Jeff Grotte.

Below are specific negative impacts and their causes. Asterisks (*) indicate causes that have been verified through the author's direct experience, personal communications to the author, newspaper, Facebook, and other social media posts. Items without an asterisk are probable but the author has not seen specific documentation as of this printing.

Negative Impact	**Causes**
Burning extra calories	Repeatedly causing them to fly, especially if chased by mobbing birds* Stress from being around humans/dogs/drones* Responding to playback by trying to find the perceived intruding owl*
Starvation	Ongoing distractions that prevent hunting* Creating noise that prevents extreme acoustic hunters like Great Gray Owls (*Strix nebulosa*) and Boreal Owls from hearing their prey
Injuries or death	Flying into branches or other objects after flash photography or bright lights are shined in their eyes in the dark Getting hit by drone blades when attacking a drone to defend territory or nest Getting hit by a car when flushed or attracted to the road by feeding* Getting eaten by a predator when flushed or attracted to playback*
Expecting food from humans	Repeated feeding by people*

There are several things that observers can do to avoid negatively impacting owls:

Give them space. There are no fixed rules here. Every owl and every situation is different, so it is important to learn how to read their body language to know if you're too close. If the owl is preening, stretching, standing with one foot tucked up, sleeping, or not looking at people (without looking around like it is going to fly), the owl is relaxed. If the owl is bug-eyed, very tall and slim (concealment posture), rapidly blinking with pinpoint pupils, or flying away from you, it is stressed. Burrowing Owls (*Athene cunicularia*) show white in their eyebrows and under their chins when stressed. To learn the details of reading owl body language, and to see more photo and video examples, visit the International Owl Center's webpage on the topic: www.InternationalOwlCenter.org/respectful_observation.

Let them find their own food. By now most people are aware that baiting owls

Eastern Screech-Owl in concealment posture indicating stress. Photo by Jeff Grotte.

with live prey to get "the shot" is not a good thing, since repeated baiting of an owl can and does cause owls to look to humans for food. You will not be the only person the owl encounters over a given winter, and this is all about cumulative impacts. Feeding starving owls is not necessarily a good thing either, since giving whole food to a very emaciated owl can actually kill it unless the owl has been warmed and rehydrated first.

Avoid using artificial lights after dark. Franklin and Marshall College

student Ariel White tested the ability of banded Northern Saw-whet Owls (*Aegolicus acadicus*) to regain full night vision after being exposed to light levels similar to a lamp used in banding. This well-controlled unpublished study found that owls did not regain full night vision and the ability to avoid obstacles until after about five minutes in complete darkness (S. Weidensaul pers. comm.). This suggests that flash photography or flashlights likely have short-term impacts on the night vision of owls.

Leave dogs at home. Owls of all sizes are naturally scared of dogs. Owls that grow up in urban areas with many dogs may become habituated to dogs and may not be stressed by them. Some dogs will go after or kill fledgling owls before they fly well, so even a habituated Great Horned Owl may consider dogs an extreme threat at fledging time. In my experience, nearly the only time a Great Horned Owl will perform a broken wing display is when a dog is present around just-fledged young.

Use your car as a blind when it's safe and appropriate to do so. Cars, tractors, and other enclosed vehicles aren't perceived to be as threatening to an owl as a human is. Safely park on the correct side of the road, get into the passenger seat if you can, and turn off the engine.

Move slowly and be quiet. Owls key into movement, and faster movements are scarier. Make as little noise as possible (talk quietly, keep your car turned off if using it as a blind) to avoid drawing their attention and to allow them to use their hearing for hunting. When a Great Gray Owl is listening to hear a vole moving under the snow (which we can't hear), it seems reasonable to assume that the sound of a car motor (which we can hear) could interfere with the ability of the owl to hear a vole.

Think hard before you use playback. If you are on your own large property, away from others, using playback maybe once a month isn't likely to cause any harm. Playback is not legal in national parks and shouldn't be used in other public areas due to the high likelihood of others also using playback. Owls respond because they perceive an intruder in their territory. Out west, never use playback for the rare Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis*), since they are highly vulnerable to Barred Owls (*Strix varia*) coming in to harass or kill them. Be aware that if you call in a small owl and then try to call a larger owl species, the larger owl may come in and kill the smaller owl (this isn't hypothetical . . . this has happened.)

Leave branches on trees. Many owls, like Northern Saw-whet Owls or Long-eared Owls (*Asio otus*), tuck themselves into trees for camouflage. Cutting branches away so you can get a better photo runs counter to the owl's need to be hidden from mobbers and predators.

Leave drones at home. Owls and diurnal raptors usually perceive drones as threats in their territory and sometimes attack them. Drones are a significant stressor to wildlife in general (Afridi et al. 2025).

Some of the best options for viewing and photographing owls with the least stress to the owls are owls nesting in urban parks with a lot of human activity. Usually, these owls are habituated to humans (they made an informed decision by selecting a nest in a public park) and aren't bothered much by people. Plus, it is difficult to keep such high-visibility owls a secret.

Now the big question: When is it ap-

propriate to share the location of or report an owl? There is no one-size-fits-all answer, but the main things to consider are the potential impacts to the owl and how eBird handles owl reports. Currently, observations of Great Gray Owls and Northern Hawk Owls (*Surnia ulula*) are automatically hidden from public outputs by eBird everywhere in the world. Long-eared Owls are hidden in the United States, and Boreal and American Barn Owls (*Tyto furcata*) are hidden in Wisconsin. Minnesota recently started hiding Boreal Owl locations as well. It is completely safe to report all these owls to eBird since their exact locations will automatically be obscured and no rare bird alerts will go out. These observations are important for owl research. However, do not share locations of any of these owls on social media or in any way that will result in many people finding out about them.

For all other owls, the observer has to make a decision about reporting or sharing. It may be best to use the "Hide from eBird output" function under "Checklist Tools" immediately after submitting the eBird report. Another option is to plot the location imprecisely (perhaps in the nearest population center) with a note that the location is not exact. Be aware that hiding your checklist makes it unavailable to biologists, managers, and other scientists as well, so you should unhide your checklist after the birds have moved on by using the "Show in eBird Output" function again under "Checklist Tools."

Some of the other sensitive situations to consider include:

- All nesting owls, because they are easy to re-find
- Northern Saw-whet Owls are food-stressed and overly sensitive in winter and they are easy to re-find
- Any owl with unusual coloration, such as leucism (pale or white plumage), melanism (very dark plumage), or to a lesser degree the pale *subarcticus* subspecies of the Great Horned Owl, because these are more highly sought after.

I am inclined to list any Snowy Owl that has settled into a winter territory in this sensitive category also. They simply attract so much attention and draw out bad behavior to get "the perfect shot" from even some of the best-behaved photographers. People mistakenly think Snowy Owls are primarily diurnal, but researchers who study them on their wintering grounds note they generally begin their activity period at dusk, with exceptions for weather, hunger and other variables (Holt et al. 2020). Thus, an audience of photographers watching them all day may interfere with their preferred resting period.

For other situations where it is unlikely that another person would be able to re-find the owl you spotted, such as seeing one perched along a road in the fall, it is probably fine to report the owl to eBird with an exact location right away. It may still be best, however, not to share the exact location on social media.

Here's an example of how I handled a sensitive owl situation in Wisconsin. A young American Barn Owl was found on the ground in La Crosse in the fall of 2021 and wound up at the Coulee Region Humane Society for rehab. Once I located the nest, I told all the immediate neighbors about it and told them not to disclose the nest location to others, or they would be inundated with people coming to see and photo-

graph the owls and they would lose all semblance of personal privacy. I contacted Ryan Brady, the Wisconsin DNR Conservation Biologist and Bird Monitoring Coordinator, to let him know about the nest and to discuss strategy regarding replacing the rehab owlet in the nest and banding options. Ryan listed, but hid, the report on eBird, since at that time eBird did not automatically hide American Barn Owls. I told three photographers that I personally trusted about the nest, so it could be documented with good photos. None spent more than one hour in total on a single day at the nest. The neighbors all kept mum, the owls raised their family, and the human neighbors preserved their privacy.

If in doubt about reporting an owl, ask yourself what could happen if you report the location. Can it be re-found? If so, hide the report or obscure the location. You can always unhide it later after the owl has moved on. Don't share locations on social media. If you need additional support in making a decision, reach out to a local biologist, wildlife rehabilitator, or university researcher to ask about appropriate behavior.

Experiencing owls is a highlight of the birding world, and getting a good photograph is a treasured accomplishment that connects people with nature. Owls are superbly adapted to hide in plain sight, an essential part of their survival strategy, yet their secrecy is what makes them so alluring and sensitive to human disturbance. If observations and photography are done in a responsible and thoughtful manner, then these remarkable raptors of the night can remain safe and future generations can share in their enjoyment.

The International Owl Center in Houston, MN is the only all-owl education center in the United States. Its mission is to make the world a better place for owls through education and research. As such, the Owl Center has a webpage dedicated to respectful owl observation to help teach birders and photographers how to minimize their impact on owls.

Thank you to Ryan Brady for helpful comments about using eBird on the front and back ends and to Daniel Erickson for suggesting improvements to the manuscript.

Literature Cited

Afridi, S., L. Laporte-Devylder, G. Maalouf, J. M. Kline, S. G. Penny, K. Hlebowicz, D. Cawthorne, and U. P. S. Lundquist. 2025. Impact of Drone Disturbances on Wildlife: A Review. Drones 9(4):311. https://doi.org/10.3390/drones9040311.

Holt, D. W., M. D. Larson, N. E. Smith, D. L. Evans, and D. F. Parmelee. 2020. Snowy Owl (Bubo scandiacus), version 1.0. In S. M. Billerman (Ed.), Birds of the World. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Lab of Ornithology. [accessed August 23, 2025]. https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.snoowl1.01