

Why does the International Owl Center have live owls in captivity?

The decision to keep owls in captivity for educational purposes is a decision requiring a lengthy analysis of the pros and cons as well as the associated regulations. Our Executive Director, Karla Bloem, has toured many raptor education facilities across North America and in the UK. She has also had conversations with and surveyed those doing owl education around the world about their various methodologies, laws and cultural contexts.

Firstly, our goals at the International Owl Center are to educate people about owls, inspire them to care about owls, then empower them to make the world a better place for owls through actions in their own lives. So how do we attract a significant number of visitors who we can educate, and reach those who may not already have a significant interest in the environment?

In North America, where we are located, people generally have a very positive view of owls, love to see live owls, and are attracted to opportunities to view them. Many people who would not consider themselves environmentalists even like to see live owls. Offering opportunities to view live owls thus helps us to reach a significant audience.

Viewing owls in the wild is difficult and is most often accomplished by viewing an active nest, calling them in using playback, or during banding by licensed banders. These activities only provide viewing options for a small number of people, and all involve stressing the wild owls to some degree. Using only these methods we would not be able to educate nearly as many people as if we used captive live owls.

In some countries it is illegal to keep live owls in captivity, such as Norway, Sweden, Israel, India and Nepal. In other countries there are few if any laws governing keeping owls as pets, such as the United Kingdom and Indonesia. In the United States it is possible to keep live owls in captivity for educational purposes, and there are extensive laws* that regulate it. The laws are in place to ensure proper training of the people caring for the owls, proper housing and husbandry, and annual reporting to ensure that owls are indeed being used regularly for public education and are not kept as pets.

Traditionally the live owls used in educational programs in the United States are wild owls that have some disability preventing them from being released to the wild. In the United Kingdom and many other European Countries, where live owls are also used in education, the vast majority of the birds used are captive bred and hand-reared. Because captive-reared owls have never known a life in the wild and have grown up around humans and our contraptions and noises, they are almost always far more relaxed and comfortable in captivity than birds that have not been raised around humans and have never previously been confined in an aviary. Captive-reared owls also are generally healthier than their non-releasable counterparts that have often suffered significant injuries which prevent them from living in the wild.

In order to reach a large audience with our message, the International Owl Center has chosen to use live, captive owls in our programming. Because the birds we handle on the glove are handled a lot, we have chosen birds that were hatched and raised in captivity so they are as comfortable as possible with their job in life, and are also fully healthy. Several of our owls are imprinted on humans and seek out and have relationships with their human handlers, most either laying eggs (females), or copulating with their handlers (males.)

Our handled owls are not allowed to breed, as this involves additional permits which may, or may not be granted, a strategy for where the young will eventually be placed (since releasing them to the wild is rarely, if ever, allowed), and if placed as education birds the owlets would need to be reared by humans instead of their parents. Also, breeding birds are not generally able to be used for education during the breeding season, removing them from our ambassador team for several months each year.

We also have three retired owls that are of wild origin. Alice the Great Horned Owl permanently injured her left wing at three weeks of age, so was raised around humans to be an educational ambassador. She is imprinted on humans, has never been able to fly, and is now in her 20s, with mild arthritis. Rusty and Iris, also Great Horned Owls, both had significant eye trauma as adults which prevented their release to the wild. We specifically were seeking completely wild owls, not habituated to humans, for our vocal study on the species. Their large aviary complex is isolated from humans and the owls are viewed via security cameras. They were allowed to breed as part of this research on the vocal development and full vocal repertoire of the species. Only one brood of young was allowed by permitting authorities to be released to the wild and the rest were kept in captivity.

Different types of aviaries are appropriate for different needs. Owls that are handled in educational programs normally have smaller aviaries, so it is easier for their handlers to work with them. They are also housed individually to improve training and make sure each individual gets the right amount of food. Owls that are on public display, but are never handled, generally have larger aviaries, since staff do not regularly need to access them to pick them up. They may, or may not, be housed in pairs. Rusty and Iris were intended to raise young in captivity that would later be released to the wild, so they have a 96-foot long aviary complex.

When we construct our future facility, we intend to have many owls in display-only aviaries. These will be larger enclosures with as much natural vegetation and trees as we can have while still making them easy to clean, safe and hygienic for the owls. We hope to be able to use select wild-injured owls in our display aviaries, housed in pairs. Handled ambassador owls will be housed off-display, singly, in smaller aviaries surrounded by natural vegetation, and will be human-reared, so they are as comfortable as possible with their life working with humans.

We are careful to make sure our captive owls enhance the learning experience at the International Owl Center. Seeing an owl up close is a very powerful and mesmerizing experience. Seeing an owl fly is even more so. In Karla's personal experience, it is more difficult to retain information when a live owl is present, and extremely difficult to retain information when an owl is flying. With that in mind, we specifically do not use live owls on a gloved hand during the main portion of our programs, so visitors focus on what is being said and taught. We use live owls at the end of the presentation as a reward to the audience and to reinforce what was just learned. When we use a flying owl, we only have one flight and ask the audience to focus on what they do, or do not, hear when the owl is flying.

Follow-up visitor surveys show nearly all respondents are very likely, or somewhat likely, to make at least one change in their lives to benefit owls based upon what they learned at our Center, so we feel our methodology is working in our setting.

There are no absolute right or wrong answers here...just a lot of pros and cons we have put serious thought into weighing before choosing how we operate at the International Owl Center within the regulations and cultural context existing in the United States.

*In the United States an individual, or a facility, normally must acquire a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and usually the state natural resources department to use live owls in educational programming. The individual/facility does not own the birds, and if they violate any of the lengthy permit conditions the birds may be confiscated. Annual reports of public educational programs must be filed, and minimum numbers of public programs are required to be presented. The public is prohibited from coming into contact with the owls, there are housing guidelines, and regulations preventing the birds from being exploited for commercial use. Although these laws only apply to native owls (some states regulate non-native raptors), there are few non-native owls in the USA and demand for them by qualified individuals is high, so it is rare they end up in uneducated hands.

Breeding is even more strictly regulated in the United States. Birds kept on education permits are not allowed to breed. In order to breed, the owls must be held on a breeding permit. Generally captive-bred owls are not allowed to be released to the wild, and non-native species absolutely would never be allowed to be released to the wild. If young owls are raised to be educational ambassadors, for their best comfort in life, they must be removed from their parents at a very early age (2 weeks or less), so the parents are not allowed to raise them. Parent-reared owlets are not socialized to humans and as comfortable living a life working with humans. Breeding owls is a very big decision which must be well thought-out in advance.

Please refer to the "Educator Resources" section of the International Owl Center's website for more information, including a paper Karla is publishing in the proceedings of the 2017 World Owl Conference in Portugal, where she co-organized a workshop on effective owl education methods with panelists from four continents.