



The Barn Owl, our local beauty--at risk?

The following contribution comes from our local amateur ornithologist, Jim Hiatt. Of all the local birds, owls are a personal favorite of his. Rather than pick his brain, I asked him to just compose the article himself--complete with great pictures:

Our most common owl in western Yolo County is one that everyone in these parts has seen--or at least heard at night--the Barn Owl. This one and the Great Horned Owl--Bubo virginianus--are worldwide in range and are likely the two best known, though The Great Horned Owl

in North America ranges further into the northern latitudes. Sometimes the Barn Owl was called by earlier generations "The Monkey-Faced Owl." And, interestingly, if you look at a half shell of a local Black Walnut, it looks very much like their 'facial disc'.

According to Birds of North America, page 330, in a number of the midwestern states, farming practices have cut down on their 'rodential' food supply, making them close to endangered in some of those areas. Especially with the reduction of older farm buildings, such as older barns and tank houses, it has made it more difficult to maintain their numbers. Happily, that is not as much the case here; we still co-exist very well with them from Hungry Hollow to Winters and up the Capay Valley--and, happily, we still have many old farm buildings to entice and house them!

Most night predators actually see in the infra-red portion of the spectrum, making hunting much easier for them--the mouse, gopher, vole, etc., is seen by the owl as a 'glowing orb' and thus an easy target. While normally they are primarily nocturnal, when caring for anywhere from 3-6 little ones I have seen them hunting as late as 10 A.M. These lovely creatures have one or two broods a year, and will feed as many of their young as they can find rodents for. Sadly, if food is sparse in a given year, and if they hatch 5-6, they may take 1-3 of them and simply throw them out of the nest. When I was a child, my grandmother would sometimes go by the tank house in the April-May time frame and find one to three little orphaned, white down-covered bodies on the ground. It was a good, though sad, way to gauge the rodent population in the immediate area. The newly fledged young hunt together with 'Mom' for a time to get the feel for it, and then go off on their own. Barn Owls have a frequently-heard 'rasping shriek' that almost sounds like the 'Shhhh!' we would use to ask someone to be



Random local barn photos by Elizabeth Monroe, while running around scouting out olives--both were delightfully abundant!





quiet. Given in flight, it sounds most like 'Shhh-EEK!!!' They also make a loud series of snapping sounds with their beak and even do this in their sleep. This is what got my attention for the owl seen above, asleep in our old-growth olive tree. I 'snapped' its picture in its sleep, rocking back and forth on its feet--pay attention and Mother Nature always has something new to teach you! I have also experienced many times in our tank house, 3-5 little ones, half-grown, with a fair amount of down still on them, trying to keep me 'at bay', by rock back and forth TOGETHER, and giving a slower and more drawn-out version of the hiss/shriek that they do as adults. When you have 5 up there, as we did one year, the 'chorus' can be so loud between the five of them that if you'd taken someone up there to see them as well, you both would have to talk in a very loud voice to hear each other above the 'din' of the 'owl-lets'!

I grew up in Woodland in the 1950s and 60s, when Woodland was more agrarian, and you saw more country-type birds than you would now, as Woodland was closer to a population of 10,000, as opposed to its current 60,000. Barn Owls could be heard at night frequently shrieking and snapping--and even Horned Owls were not uncommon there. Not so in today's world.

These are lovely creatures, with golden-tawny brown coloration on the upper parts, and a white underside, tinged with golden-brown streaks. They are one of the few owls with feathered legs down to the claws. Birds of North America tells us that these can live up to 8 years, have a wingspan of some 3 1/2 feet, and are pretty much solitary after mating.

On a final note, in the early 1980s, on the way home from work, right beside the Clover School I found one standing in the middle of the road with its eyes closed. Suspected that it had been hit and hurt, but not killed, I picked it up at the shoulders such that it couldn't claw me, and brought it home. Kept it on the front porch, and fed it raw hamburger balls the size of large marbles, and actually force-fed it, but it really didn't fight me--sensed I was trying to help it, and the meat likely tasted good anyway. Three weeks later, when it was more alert and



responsive to me, I took it outside, lifted it aloft and it promptly flew head first, right into the house! Tried again, and 'aimed' it at our walnut trees, and this time the 'launch' was successful. Saw it in the evenings for quite some time afterward.



...and then there is the elusive "Booby Owl," seen above...

Just as Jim was finishing up his article on the Barn Owl, he captured rare footage of the Burrowing Owl--or "Booby Owl," as our grandparents' might have called it. Not much bigger than a softball, laying eggs underground, they are unique in many ways--and their behavior may have led to the idiom...?

Continued on next page



The Burrowing or "Booby" Owl of the Capay Valley...



The "Booby Owl," has some more dignified names: *Athene cunicularia* is the scientific name of what's more commonly known as the Burrowing Owl. Earlier generations have also referred to this little fellow as the "Ground Owl," but my grandmother's generation referred to these during her childhood as "Booby Owls"—thus, that's my personal favorite! What gave rise to the term "Booby Owl"??? I wish I knew, but Grandma called them that a century ago when they were much more plentiful than now. I suspect it may have been some of their odd behaviors—

acted like a booby! As in, He escaped from the booby hatch?

*They are the only known species of owl that actually lives underground when not out hunting. It's easiest for them to use an abandoned squirrel hole, or a culvert, or an old pipe or pile of piping, and failing the availability of these, will simply dig their own. I learned from *Birds of North America*, p.343, that they use their beaks to dig a new home if needs be. I didn't know that one. Imagine using your TEETH to dig out a new home for yourself! And worse yet, a broken beak certainly puts them at a disadvantage in dining or in bringing home game for the little ones!*

They do lay 5-10 eggs--quite a few for an owl whose actual body size is no bigger than a softball—Way to go, Mom!! She has these underground, to boot! Their diet is everything from small rodents (mice, voles, gophers, etc.) to insects. They do tend to "pair up" for life, meaning that if you do see one, conspicuously perched upon a fence post or large clod, or on the mound around the hole, it's a good bet there's another either in the hole or very nearby.

One personal observation I've made on my own, in the evenings at dusk, is that these will fly up to a certain height--say, 30' to 50' up, and flap their wings in such a way as to hold them in a stationary position--Sparrow Hawks, White Tailed Kites, and Rough Legged Hawks do the same--while they watch for prey movement. These, like all night predators, do see in the Infra-red portion of the spectrum, which means a mouse will appear as a "glowing orb" to them and, thus, an easy catch. But where I'm going with all this is that, unlike the White-Tailed Kite, which will "drop" in stages, before finally pouncing on the prey, these little fellows don't wait for gravity to get them there, but actually FLY DOWNWARD and basically "slam" upon the "happy (or, perhaps 'unhappy') meal." I learned by watching when I still had my second job at the Landfill in Yolo, where my work adjusting gas wells frequently kept me in the field past sunset, and thereupon was blessed with many a visual treat in observing this.



Barn and “Booby” Owls of Capay Valley, continued...

How is a Booby Owl similar to Curley of "Three Stooges" fame, who, whenever he would run away from something or someone, had the habit of his trademark Woo-boo-boo-boo-boo!? Well, when approached a little too closely, the Booby Owl will jump straight up and fly back a few yards, and utter a "Wheee-blee-blee-blee-blee-blee!!"--in exactly the same manner as Curley! (Must have watched "Training Videos" of the older episodes to pick up the habit!) And from thence, upon re-alighting several yards away, will stand very straightly up, and suddenly take a very deep "bow." What a polite little creature!! This bow is repeated several times, and is actually a warning gesture to keep you safely back--or perhaps scare you away in their own odd, little "booby" manner. The pix that accompany this little missive were taken at the entranceway to our farm in Hungry Hollow in 2012. Came out rather nicely. Jim



Hungry Hollow's own 5th-generation descendant Jim Hiatt is an amateur 'birder' and photographer in the Capay Valley, whose great grandfather named this area Hungry Hollow. Jim shared the pictures, information and stories on these four pages with us.

On-line sources for Owl Information:

www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Barn_Owl

[Barn Owl - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](http://Barn_Owl - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barn_Owl

The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) is the most widely distributed species of owl, and one of the most widespread of all birds. It is also referred to as Common Barn Owl...

Burrowing Owl

en.wikipedia.org

The Burrowing Owl is a tiny but long-legged owl found throughout open landscapes of North and South America. Burrowing Owls can be found in grasslands, rangelands, agricultural areas, deserts, or any other open dry area with low vegetation... Wikipedia

Scientific name: *Athene cunicularia*

Higher classification: *Athene*

Rank: Species

NOTE: I tried to "Google" them under "Booby Owl," hoping for a lead on the possible idiom about Boobies being crazy, but got some weird sites--use Burrowing Owl!!

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