

Owl's Rest: Encountering the Wild Where You Are

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This evening I was relieved to see her take flight. It was after dusk, and she had been very still in her sound sleep all day. Her eyelids were shut tight over her huge yellow eyes as the wind tousled her long, brown shawl of striped feathers. The tree branch upon which she was perched swayed and rocked as her strong talons gripped it like a confident surfer or a steady boat upon a restless sea. The weather was cool and cloudy, a welcome break from the heat wave that had been clutching the Northwest with ninety-degree plus temperatures. I couldn't help but feel how soothing it must feel, secure on her landing and in a deep sleep like a baby being rocked to dreamland.

Nothing disturbed her rest today and I found myself lulled into a calm state observing this magnificent bird's literal go-with-the-flow ability. What seemed very clear to me was that her sleep behavior changed for the better with the cooler weather. We humans are not the only ones affected by record-breaking heat, so it seems. For the past few weeks, the Great Horned Owl, who I recently began to observe, had been mostly a light sleeper. I witnessed her panting in the scorching afternoons up in the Douglas Fir by our house. Of course, she adapts, but what I observed was definite distress from the heat.

Had she always been there, in the ravine behind our house? We have heard owls at dawn and dusk off and on for the past two years since moving to our new home; and an owl flew deftly over our heads one night as we were stargazing. It was not until very recently, however, that I came to know this night-bird.

I was at my large bedroom window doing my morning meditation. Being able to face the tall Douglas Firs and streamside ash trees is a great gift when I begin my days. I love watching and listening to the birds as they, too, awaken and begin their morning tasks. It is my great fortune, now that I'm a retired teacher, to indulge in unhurried salutations, and this morning in July was to be a memorable one.

Suddenly the Stellar's Jays, Scrub Jays, and Flickers began to screech in alarm when the flash of a large brown wing fluttered on a branch heavy with leaves. For a moment, I had looked away and I couldn't ascertain exactly what it was, but I knew it was a large bird of prey. During the spring, a Cooper's Hawk made regular rounds to our small, wooded ravine to raid nests. However, I knew this was no hawk. The wing I saw was bigger than that of a hawk and immediately I realized an owl had just landed.

Abandoning my morning ritual, I ran to find binoculars. Sure enough, there on an ash tree directly across from my window, sat a Great Horned Owl. The giant bird barely flinched as the frantic birds dashed about her in their attempt to drive her away. She held her ground and then decided to move up to an arm of the tree where there was a cozy perching spot near the trunk...a perfect place to nap. The birds continued their harassment for a while until they tired and saw that the owl was unfazed by their threats.

There was a persistent Scrub Jay who was reluctant to give up on his unwelcoming gestures towards his big cousin. But he too, in time, pulled back. I saw him oft-times lurking and occasionally squawking as if to say, "I'm still here and you are not welcome!" The owl didn't seem to care. During the day I observed her (OK, there went most of my plans for that day) preening herself (like a cat licking her hair – so cat-like in many ways with those ears and personal cleanliness), stretching her legs one at a time like a lithe dancer, looking around the area with curiosity, and dozing. I watched as a squirrel approached her (didn't the squirrel see her?) on a nearby branch and witnessed the owl eyeing the rodent but then looking away. Surely, I pondered, I was going to be horrified when the owl attacked the squirrel...but, no, (and no again and again over the next few weeks.) Over and over, I witnessed disinterest and restraint when the owl clearly was seeing birds and squirrels nearby and didn't even attempt to go after them. She was full and sleepy, without a doubt, and no threat to the ravine community during the day.

Due to her amazing camouflage, when I would return to observe the owl, it would take some time to locate her again. Even looking at the very branch where she was resting, at first, if I hadn't known there was an owl there, she would blend in perfectly with the tree. Amazing! There happened to be a tall sunflower by the back fence that, when I looked directly above it, I could easily find the owl. It only seemed natural to refer to her as Sunflower, and so that became her name.

Later that day, I stepped out boldly to the fence to get a closer view. I didn't want to disturb her, so I did my best to be quiet and stealthy. Yet, once I got to the fence, there she was, this incredibly gorgeous being, looking right at me. Our eyes locked for a time, and I felt as if she was peering deeply into my soul. I was in awe with tears in my eyes. I began to speak to her gently and she leaned her head down as if intently listening. It was then I noticed her eyes were the same color as the sunflower petals next to me. They looked like two sunflowers gazing into my being. Most unexpectedly, Sunflower became my familiar of a sort— an animal who I felt I had a deep connection to in a mysterious way. After a few minutes, the owl turned her head when a sound rattled through the tiny forest. My heart was pounding in my chest with excitement and gratitude. Sunflower touched the wild parts of my being that needed reawakening.

What a gift.

Over the days and weeks ahead, I would look for Sunflower. She would come and go, sometimes unseen for days at a time. When she returned, I always sensed her first. Then I would get the binoculars and find her. Sometimes it was the jays who alerted me, so I'd run and get the binoculars, and sure enough, there was Sunflower. One evening I was at the fence looking for her, quite certain I could sense her presence, but I couldn't see her. Then, I heard a loud "who-who." There she was on the inverted V of the ash tree looking right at me! I hooted back and we gazed at each other for a few moments before she looked up at something rustling in the branches above her. She waited while I ran in to grab the camera and snapped a few photos of her before she spread her silent wings and vanished into the forest.

Other than taking the liberty of referring to this wild bird as Sunflower (she is, after all, an individual and may or may not represent all Great Horned Owls), I objectively observed some interesting behaviors that I'd like to share that surprised me. Thanks to the appearance of this owl, I have enjoyed witnessing the antics of our belligerent Scrub Jay.

One morning, the brilliant blue jay was not about to give up harassing Sunflower. The other birds barely made an attempt to shoo her off. It was hilarious to watch because they just didn't seem to have the energy to engage the owl; but, to keep up appearances, they gave it a brief go. Leaving our determined male Scrub Jay to his own, the small flock flew off to go about their day.

This morning, Sunflower was in a different ash tree to the right of the one where I first saw her. She was settling in for sleep while the pesky jay screeched at her from branch to branch. He was at the same level as the owl pecking at the tree. Using the binoculars, I focused in on what he was doing, and this is what I saw. The Scrub Jay was collecting little pieces of bark, lichen, and tiny twigs in his beak. Then, he hopped up to a higher branch and started to release the stuff in his mouth little by little with short thrusts of his beak. In other words, the jay was dropping the sticks deliberately at the owl! I couldn't believe what I was seeing! It was funny because Sunflower simply shrugged and didn't react at all. The jay only attempted this once and I didn't witness him trying it again, but I found it to be noteworthy in the clever attempt by the jay to annoy the big owl.

A couple days later, the jay upped the ante in his determined strategies at owl removal. Like the previous morning when I was observing, there were no other birds protesting Sunflower's presence. She was in the same spot where she was the last time the jay was complaining. Once again, I watched with the binoculars and was horrified at what the jay did this time. The owl was very still and obviously getting ready for her shuteye. Suddenly, the Scrub Jay, who had been yelling at her briefly, zoomed down from a higher branch in the tree and attacked the owl! He hit Sunflower in the back with his beak and then ricocheted off in a dash. Although the owl's feathers were disheveled, Sunflower simply jerked her shoulders and didn't acknowledge the affront. The blue bird of frustration didn't try that maneuver again as far as I can tell.

In my research about Great Horned Owls, I have read they are very aggressive. From my weeks of observations, I would venture to say that, while this may be true for when they are actively hunting or guarding a nest, I would not agree with this statement. If I were a scientist I would, of course, observe other Great Horned Owls, not just this one. Alas, I am not a scientist, and Sunflower, pardon some anthropomorphizing here, appears to have chosen me to witness a few glimpses of her life. To clarify, I came to believe that Sunflower is a female because she is one very big owl. The males tend to be smaller.

The local birds seemed to be getting the notion that the owl wasn't interested in them during the day. Even the squirrels appeared to grasp that idea. Sunflower couldn't be bothered with them. The ravine seems to be a place where creatures can live in harmony while share the same space. I love it.

Great Horned Owls have been in our neighborhood long before it was a neighborhood. We live in a development (built 20 years ago) that was once woodland and farms. And the owls have been in the ravine woods for a long time, too. Sunflower is not an unexpected visitor. Rather, she is an off-and-on resident who comes back when she chooses. Great Horned Owls tend to have favorite roosting spots and return to them often. They don't migrate or travel far from their territory. She could have been up there watching me gardening or playing with my grandchildren in the back yard. We never had a clue. Based on the reaction of the jays, I'd say they have seen her before, they instinctively know she's a predator, and go on the alert. Anyway, she belongs here as much as they do.

Unfortunately, there are neighbors who think it's a good idea to let their cats wander outside. The other day my husband and I discovered a freshly killed cat skull among the blackberry bushes where we were collecting the fruit. We've heard neighbors complain they can't find their cats and we shake our heads.... I can't imagine what it would be like to be a predator like owls. Indulge me, if you will, in envisioning yourself as an owl. You wake up at the crepuscular hour in time to start your day/night. You spend the bulk of your time killing rodents, skunks, etc., so you can survive. It's tough work and requires a great deal of focus, strength, endurance, and courage. Sometimes being a predator is very dangerous. I read that Great Horned Owls have been known to attack porcupines with tragic results for both animals. Ouch!

In my opinion, it is important to have compassion for predators. I was upset to watch the hawk fly off with the chicks from a robin's nest last spring. My heart broke for the two parents who flew after the hawk with the chirping chick in its talons. Back at the hawk's nest, their hungry chicks were waiting for their breakfast. Nature is rife with such things all the time. The big difference between humans and these animals is that there is no greed, no killing for sport, no waste nor cruelty for cruelty's sake. They take what they need, and they keep each other in balance. Temple Grandin said it best: "Nature is cruel, but we don't have to be." I think assigning the term cruel to nature is not a fair description, though. I'd rather think of it as nature is what it is.

Taking my experiences with Sunflower into the magical, spiritual, and very personal arena, I would like to share the poignant lessons she has taught me by virtue of her presence and her authenticity.

Owls are known to be harbingers of change. When an owl appears, take note of what needs transforming in your life and be prepared to fly out of your comfort zone. With the owl as your guide, life may invite you to reconsider your perceived limitations of yourself, question the stories you tell/think about yourself, and take you on a journey into the unknown, mysterious parts of your psyche of which you may be afraid. The alchemical process can be unpleasant as you discover or rediscover your true nature. Sunflower's appearance was no accident, because, ready or not, it's time for some big inner changes for me.

Sunflower demonstrated literally that she is bigger than the small things. She let things roll off her shoulders and didn't let the antics of the birds get to her. She shrugged off their insults and didn't take them personally. She knows how to use her power wisely and conserves her energy by focusing on what really matters. She keeps her eyes on the bigger picture. Wow!

She shows restraint when there is potential for emotional explosion. The birds could have really got her ire. But she's one cool chick.

I love her quiet dignity. "I know who I am and I'm not ashamed to be an owl even though I am greatly disliked." Sunflower knows her worth. No wonder the owl is called wise. Her discerning ability to know what and when to react is admirable. Well done!

She doesn't let her power go to her head. She's a top predator and she is powerful. But she doesn't go around pushing weaker birds nor picking fights with equals to prove she's best. Awesome!

She's patient. I mean *p a t i e n t*. Be still. Wait. It'll pass. Nice.

The owl shows trust in herself and in the unfolding of things. There's a faith in her abilities and confidence that she can handle what arises. No second-guessing or over thinking. Lucky lady.

Sunflower is observant with keen eyes, seeing what she sees. She watches and tracks things. She notices things. She takes her time and observes to get information. Like all wild animals, she uses all her senses to live with great awareness. And when she's off duty, she closes her eyes and retreats to renew her energy. A great example of mindfulness!

She is who she is, there is no façade nor vanity. She is incredibly beautiful and gorgeous and just everything amazing because she doesn't put on airs (excuse the pun) and is authentic with no apologies. An owl doesn't have to explain anything or to have to achieve anything. Every day being is enough. Yes!

I'm sure there's more, but you get the idea. Just by observing Sunflower, all the aforementioned qualities I described were very evident. I did not look up any of these attributes, they were very clear to me as a witness. Sometimes all we need to do is pay attention, be present to the drama as close as our nearest tree.

Without a doubt, Sunflower touched the wild in me. The wildness we share, that we are a part of. We belong here, both of us, together as one, as we learn to embrace the wild in ourselves. We can thrive in balance with the untamed parts of our world, and we can connect with the deeper spirit of life if we open to the wings of their being.

The journey with Sunflower continued to unfold as summer nodded into August. One morning, she was perched on a branch on a tree right next to our yard. We were having breakfast when I heard the familiar commotion of the jays. Sure enough, there was Sunflower dodging fly-bys by the adamant jays. She was more agitated by the threats of the birds, ducking and looking frantically around for them. The cacophony soon ended, and everyone went about their morning business. I didn't wish to startle her, so I kept back behind our bushes to watch her for a while.

Another morning, after I got out of bed and pulled back the curtains, I was treated with the delightful view of Sunflower flying from just below our yard into her favorite roost. She spread her brown shawl into the cool, cloudy air and landed with perfect grace. I've noticed that when she appears before the other birds wake up, there is much less fuss about her presence. A little later, our notorious scrub jay turned up to scold her but, it didn't last long. I observed Sunflower ignoring him with half an eye open. She looked very sleepy and content in the wonderfully quiet and peaceful start to the day. Or, to her slumber.

As Sunflower dozed, a hefty, red squirrel suddenly jumped from a branch nearby, from her tree to the tree next to it, making quite a noise. The scraggly ash tree shook quite noticeably, and with a bit of noise. I looked back to the owl and saw she was still asleep, with her eyes closed, as if aware but from a place of deep rest. There, on a bare, leafless branch that stuck out a way into the ravine (a very vulnerable spot), the large squirrel found a little lichen covered spot....and proceeded to fall asleep! He looked very comfortable with his tail hanging and feet tucked in as he drifted away to dreamland. I wanted to grab my camera and tiptoe out to get a good photo of this scene, but I didn't wish to disturb these beautiful moments.

After about an hour, the squirrel suddenly woke up and scampered off. Sunflower slept on her perch most of the day, but that afternoon she flew off to somewhere cooler. The sun came out and I surmised she was resting comfortably elsewhere.

Edward Hicks created a painting called *Peaceable Kingdom* (1844-46) in which, on the right half of the piece, a lion rests next to cattle and a wolf next to sheep. On the left side of the painting, there are white settlers and Native Americans portraying an idyllic scene of human beings living in peace. As I watched the owl, a powerful predator, and the heavy-set squirrel, a sure prey, sleeping in nearby trees, literally next to each other, I was deeply moved at the balance these two beings struck up with one another. The scene before me evoked this early American oil painting. Even though the jays do not want the owl around, things do settle down into a rhythm, where there is room for everyone to live in harmony. The squirrel knows the owl is no threat during the day and sleeps out in the open without fear.

This experience has also touched my deep sorrow for these wild creatures, however. Rampant development looms ahead like the approach of a dark storm for those of us who behold such wonder and beauty thriving in what narrow spaces that can be found. Soon, the fields and forests near where we live will all be lost to a grand plan of economic growth whereby hundreds of new homes and many new business buildings will sit upon yet more disappearing

wild spaces. The mindset that we must keep growing, growing, expanding, and expanding without regard for those who call the land home is surely a tragedy. Tragic for them, and ultimately, tragic for us. For what we lose is an essential connection to the land and the other beings who also call this earth their home.

A marvelous glass artist, Kate Saunders, who is a great advocate for wolves, wrote something to me recently that I would like to share as I conclude this story:

“...an important skill I learned from Rick McIntyre, wolf expert and writer; [is] that once you see an animal and let it into your heart, you will always support and work for that animal’s survival.”

I learned so much by just observing. This unexpected experience happened right in my back yard. To connect with wildlife, you needn’t live in the country or even leave your home or city block. Just look up. Pay attention. What’s going on in the trees? In the sky? Watch for a while, make it a practice. Record and/or draw what you see if you like. You will be amazed at everything going on. Nature is the best teacher and is full of wonderful, and sometimes heartbreaking, lessons.

Author’s Note:

As I finish this article, now the month of October, the ravine is especially quiet. We were away for a few weeks, and I am readjusting to being home again. I have come up with a special name for our home and the ravine in the back. I was inspired by the naming of places/homes in England. “Owl Ghyll” is the name we chose. Ghyll means a stream in a ravine. There is a small creek in the ravine where Sunflower liked to roost, so it seems a perfect name. Sunflower has returned a few times since we returned from our trip. We’ve hooted back and forth a couple of times after dusk. I just saw her again this morning (mid-October). When I don’t see her, I feel glad in my heart because I take comfort that she’s somewhere out there “wilding” and free.

May I be worthy of the task to help preserve the habitat of owls, and all that is beautiful and wild in the world and in ourselves.

Owl of Change

I looked through her yellow eyes
and saw who I was.
When she spread her wings to fly,
I was lifted into the starry night,
seeing everything.

Thank you, Sunflower.