

Bird Watch on the Palmer Divide

Barn owls



By Elizabeth Hacker

Owls are often misunderstood. Many cultures have myths and superstitions surrounding owls that are based in fear, not science.



Above: Stacey O'Brien and Wesley.

A while back, I read an Audubon book review about a barn owl raised in captivity, and I was compelled to pick up a copy. *Wesley the Owl: The Remarkable Love Story of an Owl and His Girl* is an extraordinary firsthand account of a barn owl raised in captivity.

It is a heart-warming story of Stacey O'Brien, a young biologist working as a lab assistant at Caltech's prestigious raptor laboratory. On Valentine's Day in 1985, an injured owlet was brought to the lab. The owlet

was only 4 days old and its wing was broken. It would never survive in the wild. O'Brien couldn't resist this helpless fuzzy little creature and adopted him.

"Wesley went everywhere with me from then on. I even wrapped him in baby blankets and held him in my arms while grocery shopping, to keep him warm during the first cold winter. Occasionally someone would ask to see 'the baby,' and when I opened the blanket, would leap back shrieking, 'What is that?! A dinosaur?' Apparently, the world is full of educated adults with mortgages and stock portfolios who think people are walking around grocery stores with dinosaurs in their arms."

O'Brien understood that adopting him would be a commitment for the owl's lifetime. As a scientist, it would be a special opportunity for her to study a barn owl. She didn't realize it at the time, but Wesley would take her on a 19-year journey of scientific study and self discovery.

Imprinting

Imprinting is a rapid learning process in which many newborn birds establish a behavior pattern of recognition and attraction to their parent. The first object they see

becomes their identity.

Wesley was 4 days old when hikers found him and brought this injured bird to Caltech. He had not yet opened his eyes. The first person he saw was O'Brien and he imprinted her. She became his parent and lifelong friend.

Diet

A barn owl's diet is 97 percent mice. In the beginning, O'Brien cut up mice into little pieces that she hand-fed to Wesley. At first he was so weak that she rubbed his beak to get him to open it and accept food.

As an adult, Wesley ate four mice a day. Often he swallowed them whole and coughed up a smooth pellet of fur and bones. O'Brien discovered that when she left more than four dead mice for Wesley, he first ate the head and liver, and then maybe the body, but he would leave the intestines.

Wesley didn't like to eat alone, so he insisted that O'Brien also eat a mouse. When he brought her a mouse, if she refused his offering, his feelings would be hurt and he would sulk. Wesley would check her hands to make sure she wasn't hiding it.

Over his lifetime, Wesley ate 28,000 mice. The stories O'Brien describes about how she purchased the mice and fed Wesley are hilarious and hair-raising.

Preening, feathers, and molting

Every day, Wesley sat in front of a mirror and meticulously preened his feathers. All birds molt, or grow new feathers to replace the old weathered ones. It's painful as new pin feathers poke through a bird's skin.

To ease the pain and show Wesley her affection, O'Brien often preened Wesley's feathers with her fingers. Wesley responded by preening her long hair with his beak. Preening is one way birds express their feelings for each other.

Hunting

Owls are masterful hunters, but Wesley was raised in captivity and was not taught to hunt. The few times O'Brien had presented him with a live mouse to encourage him to hunt, Wesley was frightened and ran away from it.

At 3, Wesley began turning over her finches' cages and O'Brien discovered he could hunt. She came to realize that even though Wesley was a captive bird, he was still a wild bird and it was his nature to hunt.

The Way of the Owl

Are owls really wise? Is an owl capable of communicating and displaying emotion?

O'Brien coined the term "The Way of the Owl" to describe Wesley's unique way of communicating and processing information. He had an uncanny ability to understand time. If she told Wesley she would come back in two hours, O'Brien knew if it extended to three hours, he would be angry and scold her.

Owls can't smell, but they have exceptional hearing. They perceive much information through their ears and can even detect the slightest movement of a mouse under 3 feet of snow. O'Brien realized that loud sounds irritated Wesley, so if she wanted him to understand her, she had to talk in a reassuring gentle manner. As cute as he was, she dared not laugh at him because his feelings would be hurt and Wesley would sulk and avoid her.

At night, Wesley would spread his wings and embrace O'Brien in what she calls a hug. Owls mate for life and are protective of their mate. Wesley considered O'Brien his and did not tolerate any of O'Brien suitors. He would attack them if they entered his space.

Raptor Lab at Caltech

O'Brien brings her readers inside the prestigious research community she describes as a scientific Hogwarts, a place where owls fly freely and scientists are extremely dedicated to their research.

With an eye for detail not often seen in books about animals, Stacey O'Brien tells her fascinating story with great passion. Her devotion to Wesley and her detailed observations are truly remarkable, but there is a twist. When Stacey is diagnosed with a potentially deadly rare disorder, it is Wesley who comes to her rescue.

Elizabeth Hacker is a writer and artist. Email her at elizabethhacker@ocn.me to share bird pictures and stories.

Art Matters

Art in any season: Celebrate for yourself!



By Janet Sellers

"Be who you are, and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter, and those who matter don't mind."—Dr. Seuss

It's October already. And the last art hop is over for the season. The recent freeze zapped our gardens—my plot at Monument Community Garden was reaching for the sky one day and drooping pathetically the next. All summer long, I enjoyed the gardening rituals of planting, watering, and weeding, and then came the sprouts and the plants and the blooms. When the actual vegetables appeared, they were so beautiful and perfect, shiny and fresh, I just had to draw them and put on the watercolors.

All summer long, I went to Monument Lake daily and paddled around in my kayak, took photo reference snapshots from the shore and from the boat so I could paint the gorgeous scenes. My students often met me at the shore, where we did watercolor class en plein air. We painted the earth, water, and sky week after sunshiny week outdoors, early in the mornings (well, 7 a.m. is early for me) and evenings. The hot days or rainstorm days were studio times indoors, but for the most part we enjoyed the outdoors for art.

Even until the end of September, we still went to the lake, wrapped in sweaters, for our outdoor forays in nature. The trout were still jumping at sunset, the bugs were still buzzing around until it got cool and dark, but this month it will all go still. Alas, the palette and the watercolors would just freeze on the brush if we painted outdoors, even if we were diehards and we went out in ski clothes!

So, now, what to do? Daily things, mundane daily activities are just so much better when we have something vibrant art to look forward to. One thought is to stir up your art spirit with an art class or any of our year-round

art events at our local galleries and artist studios. Even though the evenings have turned chilly—I suspect that is why the Art Hop ends with the summer weather—we have a lot to look forward to nearby in our community if we just drop by and see what is there.

Wisdom Tea House and Bella Art and Frame Gallery have regular art shows and public receptions every month, as does the Tri-Lakes Center for the Arts (TLCA), Bliss Studio Gallery, and Secret Window Gallery, which are all on our art radar in the Monument Art Quarter and in Palmer Lake. And while they've been here over a dozen years in our area, possibly new to your art radar scope is Southwinds Fine Art Gallery on Rollercoaster and Baptist Roads, which has special art events and is open by appointment as well.

Fabulous Friday Art Nights are scheduled for **Oct. 4, 11, 18**; 5 to 8 p.m. Local art gallery receptions for featured artists, events, and art shows. First Friday is at the TLCA, 304 Highway 105 in Palmer Lake; Second Friday is at Bella Art and Frame, 187 Washington St., and Third Friday is at Southwinds Fine Art Gallery, corner of Baptist and Roller Coaster Roads, Colorado Springs.

TLCA: John DeFrancesco Exhibit free opening reception, Oct. 4, 6 to 8 p.m. Monument artist John DeFrancesco's exhibit of 30 oil paintings, *Glorious Days*, will run through **Oct. 26**. Info: 481-0475, jdefrancesco522@comcast.net, www.johndefrancesco.com.

Bella Art and Frame Gallery: **Oct. 11**, 5 to 8 p.m. The reception for resident artists of Bella Art and Frame Gallery, "Celebrating: resident artists at Bella Art and Frame Gallery." Drop by and celebrate with your favorite artists there. It's a brand new exhibit and sale of art for over 15 of the resident artists. Show runs Oct. 2 to 30, hosting over 20 local fine artists in the media of paintings, photography, ceramics, textiles, jewelry, and mixed media.

Southwinds Fine Art Gallery: In October, the gallery will offer tours of the local artists' work by appointment most days of the week. The gallery has a wide variety of art by local artists. This innovative community gallery features the work of J. Clark Wider that showcases American black cultural history. Wider's work is included in the White House Art Collection. Call ahead to set up and enjoy your personal or group tour: (719) 481-6157.

Janet Sellers is an American artist, art teacher, and writer. She makes public art sculptures for Colorado cities, teaches art locally, and you can often see her painting pictures outdoors, poodle at her side, in just about any weather. She can be reached at janetsellers@ocn.me.



Above (L to R): Artists Michael DeVore, left, and Cecilia Thorell with their daughter in the TLCA Lucy Owens Gallery at DeVore's September exhibition filled with his traditional, realist style paintings and drawings. Both artists were classically trained in Italy, where they met at art school. Thorell paints portraits, still lifes, and commissions. Photo by Janet Sellers.