

# Owl who escaped from zoo is NYC's latest avian celebrity

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A Eurasian eagle-owl named Flaco sits in a tree in Central Park in New York, Monday, Feb. 6, 2023. The owl, who resided at the Central Park Zoo, flew the coop after someone vandalized its exhibit by cutting through stainless steel mesh. Zoo officials say Flaco was discovered missing at 8:30 p.m. Thursday and remained on the loose Monday. Credit: AP Photo/Seth Wenig

An owl who escaped from the Central Park Zoo after someone damaged his cage has become New York City's latest avian celebrity, attracting gawkers as he surveys the park from one tall tree or another but stoking fears that he can't hunt and will starve.

The owl, a Eurasian eagle-owl named Flaco, escaped Feb. 2, zoo spokesperson Max Pulsinelli said in a news release the following day. "The exhibit had been vandalized and the stainless steel mesh cut," Pulsinelli said. "Upon [notification](#), a team was mobilized to search for the bird."

Flaco flew from the zoo to the nearby shopping hub of Fifth Avenue, where [police officers tried to catch him and failed](#).

He returned to Central Park the next morning and since then has been [spotted at various locations](#) in the southeast section of the park. Flaco has spent part of his time [on the grounds of the zoo he fled](#), but he has not returned to captivity on his own.

Zoo officials said last week that they were seeking to recapture Flaco, but they have not issued any updates on their efforts since then.

No one has seen Flaco eat during his six days on the lam, said David Barrett, who runs birding Twitter accounts including Manhattan Bird Alert, Brooklyn Bird Alert and Bronx Bird Alert.

Wednesday found Flaco commanding a view of Wollman Rink's ice skaters from an oak tree in the park's Hallett Nature Sanctuary. A small crowd watched from a respectful distance.



A crowd of people gather to look at a Eurasian eagle-owl named Flaco in Central Park in New York, Monday, Feb. 6, 2023. The owl, who resided at the Central Park Zoo, flew the coop after someone vandalized its exhibit by cutting through stainless steel mesh. Zoo officials say Flaco was discovered missing at 8:30 p.m. Thursday and remained on the loose Monday. Credit: AP Photo/Seth Wenig

"I just want to observe how he's doing myself," retired health care worker Gig Palileo said as she examined the owl through her camera lens. "I'm a nurse, so I'm always kind of like, 'Is the eyes still alert?'"

Palileo said she was saddened "that somebody had let this guy go without even thinking what's the consequences. ... Probably he doesn't know how to hunt."

Kenny Cwiok, a retired correction officer in the state prison system, was more sanguine about the owl's survival in the wild. "I think he can survive," Kwiok said. "If he learned how to fly I guess he can learn how to hunt."

Kwiok called Flaco "a celebrity" like the brightly plumaged Mandarin duck that dazzled [park](#)-goers a few years ago. "He was a star," Kwiok said. "He was a Brad Pitt for Central Park."

The Eurasian eagle-owl is one of the larger owl species with a wingspan of up to 79 inches (2 meters), according to the Wildlife Conservation Society. They have large talons and distinctive ear tufts.

Like the Mandarin duck, the Eurasian eagle-owl is not native to North America, but native owl species including great horned owls and barred owls do frequent Central Park, where they dine on rats, mice and smaller birds.

Dustin Partridge, director of conservation and science for NYC Audubon, said he hopes Flaco's plight raises awareness of the fugitive bird's wild cousins. "There's a lot of owl life in the city," Partridge said. "If you've never seen an owl, they're majestic creatures."

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