

Drone chase highlights dangers to owls and breeding birds

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On her way home from work on a recent wintry night, Kathy Keane ran into a group of people quietly watching a pair of great horned owls perched on a tree in Lincoln Park.

"I started hearing the 'hoot, hoot,' and then the other would call back 'hoot, hoot,'" she told the Tribune. "And it was just so beautiful."

Excited about the sighting, she made sure to walk by the same spot the next day with her husband, Patrick Keane.

The bird was still on the tree, but then a drone flew toward the owl and scared it away. The Keanes decided to approach the two people piloting the aircraft.

"I'm like, 'Do you realize you scared the owl with that thing?'" Patrick Keane recalled. "And he got—I'm not exaggerating here—he got a big smile on his face and said, 'Yeah, we did.' And he's like, 'We scared the other one earlier in the evening.'"

As native great horned owls court and nest in Chicago, and expectations ramp up for rare winter sightings of [snowy owls](#) from the Arctic, encounters like this underscore the importance of viewing and photographing these birds safely, experts say.

"The problem of harassing wildlife and specifically owls is not a new one," said Edward Warden, president of the Chicago Ornithological Society. "There's something incredibly compelling about them as birds. ... People (get) excited to see them when they're in our midst, whether you call yourself a birder or not, it's kind of a very universal thing."

Generally, curious humans disturbing owls is unintentional. But interactions are more likely to occur in the winter, when trees have no leaves and the birds are easier to spot, and as breeding season begins.

The Chicago Bird Alliance says humans can stress out owls by interfering with their hunting, causing fatigue and making them more vulnerable to traffic and predators like peregrine falcons or red-tailed

hawks.

Almost 4 million great horned owls can be found in a wide variety of habitats across North America, including in Illinois. This species is often depicted as a wise figure in popular culture and storybooks.

The second-heaviest owl species in America after snowy owls, great horned owls are known for their hunting skills, big yellow eyes, deep hoots and the feather tufts on their heads. They nest as early as January, since their owlets need more time than other [young birds](#) to learn to hunt on their own ahead of the next winter, according to the Chicago Bird Alliance.

"They can handle a lot, and the fact that they're even making their way into a city, which is inherently a harsher environment than a nice, cozy forest preserve," Warden said. "These are already hardworking animals. They're doing their best to scrape out a living in what can be a really challenging space and environment."

Matt Igleski, executive director of the Chicago Bird Alliance, said that waking up nocturnal animals like great horned owls in the middle of the day is like waking up a person in the middle of the night, forcing them to run around and expecting them to perform well the next morning.

Especially during the winter, owls are "running a very tight energy budget," Warden said, and they need to make every calorie count to keep warm and survive. If they spend their time avoiding humans and fleeing drones, they are burning precious energy.

"And it's not hyperbole at all to say that if these birds are harassed enough, they can die from it," he said. "We've seen it happen many times before."

Snowy owls

Every winter, Chicagoans cross their fingers in hopes of spotting snowy owls in and around the city. Igleski said he has experienced plenty of impromptu sightings along the lakefront.

"When you do find one, all of a sudden it turns and it has eyes and you're like, 'Oh!'" he said. "It's just a big, chunky owl. And it's almost all white. And in the wintertime, it's just a scene that sort of feels very 'winter,' you know? It's hard to describe it, but it just puts you in that moment of: This is so cool, that we're sharing this cold day together."

Their visits are rare, which only heightens excitement around sightings—and leads to more encounters with humans.

The sporadic presence of these owls in northern U.S. states is hard to predict. Their loosely cyclic migration to the south, referred to as an "irruption," is decided by several factors including climate and inclement weather, [food availability](#) and [population numbers](#).

For instance, when the Arctic lemming population—the predator's main food source—is abundant and allows many young snowy owls to feed and survive, intense competition for food leads many of them to migrate south to hunt for other prey like voles, mice and rabbits.

Warden said in the past decade, Illinois has seen only two big snowy owl irruptions: one in the winter of 2013–14 and another in the winter of 2017-18. During the latter, "well over a dozen" snowy owls were regularly seen throughout the Chicago area; at least three were often spotted on the Museum Campus.

Because they are often awake during the day and their white plumage makes them highly visible in the city, these northern visitors are easy for

humans to find—and disrupt.

Snowy owls are also susceptible to stress since they are young, often only six or seven months old, and have less experience and stamina than adults. After traveling thousands of miles, the full-grown birds may be more dehydrated and exhausted than they look.

The wintertime presence of snowy owls in Canada and the United States is already limited, but it might become even rarer as [climate change](#) affects Arctic food webs and wintering snowy owls remain closer to home.

"All these things kind of throw the traditional pattern into a less predictable pattern. And it all ties together to basically create less predictability and more chaos," Warden said.

Snowy owl populations sharply declined by 64% between 1970 and 2014, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature classified them as a "vulnerable" species in 2021.

"Can we point to climate change as the primary culprit? Probably not," Warden added. "But can we point to it as a culprit? Most certainly."

Climate change is an additional stressor that might make snowy owl irruptions less common.

"When you look at a snowy owl," Warden said, "that one owl is part of a picture. It's part of a population of birds that are working hard to survive and keep their species alive. And we know there's already pressures that are really making it harder for them to do that every year. So, if that means that we (should) go out of our way to make sure that the one we're seeing today can rest a little easier, why wouldn't we want to do that?"

Viewing owls

This bird's signature silent, wide-eyed stare can actually be a clear indicator of stress: If an owl looks at a person frequently, it probably means that person is too close.

"They're actually incredibly expressive and if you know how to read the signs, they tell you what they're thinking; they tell you how they feel about your presence," Warden said. "A great horned owl is ... king in the food chains, but it's still going to be frightened of you. We are still the big boys on the block here."

If an owl's eyes are closed, half-closed or focused elsewhere, that's a good sign that, while the bird might be aware of a human's presence, it's not concerned about it.

When people spot an owl in the wild, they should be as quiet as possible and maintain their distance, using binoculars for viewing. Flash photography should always be avoided, especially after dark. Experts also suggest not sharing exact sighting locations to ensure the bird's safety.

"You don't want to be unnecessarily policing people for their interactions with wildlife," Warden said.

"I find that a lot of the time there is a disconnect in recognition. It's usually not somebody trying to be actively mean or hurtful when you find examples of harassment. So oftentimes, these kinds of things just involve somebody speaking up. ... A lot of people are already kind of inherently prepared to have that degree of emotional connection and sympathy with the wildlife around them—sometimes it takes a little hand-holding."

But then there are more extreme cases like the Keanes' interaction.

"I was so upset, and I kind of wish we had said more, maybe been more confrontational," Kathy Keane said. "I was so surprised that the man's response was literally excitement that he had scared and chased the owls away, that I think I didn't really know how to respond in the moment. But by the time I got home, I thought, 'This is so wrong, something has to be done.'"

According to Illinois law, it is illegal to "take, pursue or intentionally harass or disturb in any manner any wild birds or mammals by use or aid of any vehicle, conveyance, or unmanned aircraft." Violating this law is a Class A misdemeanor and punishable by a fine of at least \$500 and up to \$5,000.

"Per the Chicago Park District's Code, the use of apparatus for aviation, including drones, is prohibited on park property without a permit," said a district spokesperson in an emailed statement to the Tribune.

"The Code also provides that no person shall harass or harm in any manner any animal or bird on park property. Violators are subject to removal from the park. Chicago Park District security works closely with the Chicago Police Department to enforce Park District Code."

Urban coexistence

Igleski suggested those interested in viewing owls find trips and walks organized by local birding organizations, which can provide a space to learn about and observe them respectfully.

"Recognize that you both need that space," Igleski said. "We're not the only (creatures) that exist here, and we really do need to be more aware of the entirety of who is using these areas. It is not just for us, it is for

these animals, and a lot of these populations have been either living here or migrating through here for thousands and thousands of years."

Owls and other animals like foxes and coyotes can be beneficial for city problems such as rodent infestation—which has earned Chicago the title of "rattiest" city in America for nine straight years.

Warden said people need to remember animals lived in the area long before Chicago came along.

"So, you slap a major city in here, you're gonna see some (wildlife) try to come back in," he said. "There's well over 300 species of birds that are found in Chicagoland annually, at some point in the year. And that's truly a remarkable number and a remarkable testament to the fact that there is room for everybody, so to speak."

Kathy Keane said human boundaries are inevitably and increasingly going to "bump" into wildlife.

"As our urban areas expand, animals still have to have a place to live," she said. "We need to find a way to coexist respectfully."

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