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Sounds in the Night

By Ruth Heil, thewritebeat.com

Owls intrigue me. No other bird calls make me freeze in place the way the sound of an owl does. I suppose it has something to do with their predatory persona, but moreover I love the mysterious fact that I can't see them.

Like the nocturnal Whip-poor-will, I must be satisfied to just hear their voice. Of course, matching a noise heard in the woods to a photo seen in a book certainly helps my mind create a vision. But recently there was one sound behind my house that puzzled me, and were it not for the help of a friend in the LVAS, I would still be envisioning a very wrong picture.

At first I thought my husband had reacted to the sight of a snake or some other unwelcomed surprise found outside the old home into which we had just moved. I was inside, doors closed, when I heard the "Awh!" I continued cooking dinner knowing I would find out what happened soon enough. But then, I heard it again. I stopped and looked out the window to find Glenn gesturing for me to come outside, quickly and quietly.

"Listen," he whispered. "What the heck was that?"

"I heard it; I thought it was you." I said.

We stood silently in the driveway, just before dusk, waiting, until the scream came again. "Hoo Awh!"

We blinked at each other in disbelief.

"I think it's an owl," I said.

"No way. That sounds like something barking, like a big dog or a fox or a coyote."

Days later, a biologist from the PA Game Commission visited my property (for unrelated

reasons). I told him I had been hearing the undeniable sounds of Great Horned Owls nearby, and then told him about the unidentified noise. Doubtfully, he suggested a Barred Owl. "Yes, sometimes they call in the daylight," he said. But the trees around us told him that the woodland was too young and therefore void of the necessary tree cavities a Barred Owl would need. He offered his best impression -- a good one at that -- but the soft call he mimicked was nothing close to what we had heard.

It didn't matter. I already knew where I was going to turn for advice on the matter: my friend Kevin Crilley who literally (co-)wrote the book on birds in the Lehigh Valley, a region located just north of my home. I dropped Kevin an email asking his opinion about the possibility of a Barred Owl. "Could be," he said in an interested tone, "but I thought they were all gone from here." Within minutes he sent me a link to [The Cornell Lab of Ornithology's](#) Barred Owl recordings, one that didn't just include the "who cooks for you?" call the biologist had mimicked but also the very sharp, very loud, almost comical, female "hoo-aw" call.

I immediately joked, "any female who hoo-aws like that is alright in my book." There was no denying it: the sound was exactly what we had heard. Suddenly, upon identification, I felt connected. This is the magical part about bird watching -- or bird listening in this case. Like putting a face on the human voice at the other end of the telephone, once you can visualize a being, once you gain a better understanding of its habits, where it lives, and how it survives, you become far more captivated than if you'd have left the stranger unidentified.

Since Barred Owls tend to stay put—as long as they can ward off the Great Horned Owls around the corner—I'm hoping and expecting to hear the other calls (mating, fledgling, defending, etc.) at the Cornell link. I do frequently hear the inquiry about cooking, often right about the time I'm hungry for dinner, usually met with my response, "no one." While my husband says I have a bionic ear, I believe I notice the calls because I am simply tuned in. I can hear owls (horned, screech, etc.) above conversation, television, campfire, and window pane, and when I do, I have no choice but to freeze and listen.

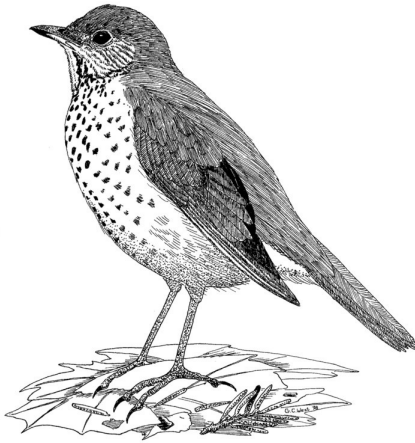
Thanks to incidents such as this one, my husband and I are slowly feeling less like strangers in our new territory. We are building our own stories about this place, scattering our scents into the air, and bouncing our sounds around its rooms. Outside, with each insect, amphibian, reptile, and

bird that passes through and shows itself, I get to know better the place in which I now live. And while I'm not particularly fond of insects, amphibians, and reptiles, I do love the birds, even the ones I cannot see ... especially the ones I cannot see.

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Bicknell's Thrush, by George West

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