

Saving a baby Owl

by David George



Alive and well

To save or not to save an animal is a question we all have to answer for ourselves. Most of the time it is simple. In the wild you let nature take its course no matter what the outcome. However, there are times that it may be appropriate to help an animal. The ultimate question is when and how. Personal choice and personal responsibility is the name of that game.

This is a story about those choices made by a park ranger in Florida named Nathan. It began with a nest of barred owls. One of the owlets (they are named owlets, not chicks) had died due to a fall out of the nest. As told to me by several people. I am unaware of anyone seeing the falling event at this time.

Common names just for fun. The Northern Barred Owl, the striped owl, and my favorite the HOOT owl. If you ever have heard one you will understand that name.

A little information about the owls would probably be helpful. Barred owls are large owls named for the vertical dark stripes on their light-colored feathers. They have a round head with



no ear or feather tufts like the great horned owl.



Adult Barred Owl

Barred Owl Baby

Great Horned Owl

Barred Owl general information:

Scientific Name: ***Strix varia***.

The females are about 20-25 percent larger than the males. Their height is 16-20 inches, their wingspan is approximately 36-43 inches. The babies are unique in that they fledge or leave the nest before they can fly. It is not uncommon to find a young barred owl on the ground. This is normal depending on the age of the owlet. As adults, they often hunt on the ground and can fly up on a tree and then climb up the branches. This is where the issue of helping an owlet and interfering with the normal process collide. They mature to full size and strength in about 8 or 9 weeks.

Now the community-based rescue or interference depending on your point of view needs to be addressed. The first item to be put to rest is the initial return of the owlet to the tree by the ranger using a shirt. That was a judgment call made by Nathan based on his concerns and experience. I have no basis to think it was not warranted. In this particular park, it can get very crowded in that area with dogs abounding. While most are on leashes some do run loose or easily break away from their handlers. The natural predators of the baby owl also had to be considered as the baby calls to its parents for food, sometimes quite loudly and often, made finding it pretty easy. So it appears he acted in the best interest of the baby owl by his standards and experience. Score one for the ranger.

Now comes the questions posed by making decisions on making the area safer for the young owl up in the tree but the lower branches. With a lot of input from the local park walkers and people who took hours out of their days to monitor the owl family yellow tape was used to cordon off the area. There was a lot of pressure to do something. Was the sealing of the area with bright yellow tape including blocking a road the best way to keep the owlet safe with the least amount of disturbance and stress? In my opinion no it located the owls for the general public especially Easter weekend. It was difficult to watch at times as there were so many with telephoto lenses, tripods, and binoculars they blocked the road before the weekend. Easter morning some of the tapes were removed to allow access to the road going by the shelter

house. On Monday all the tape was removed and the mass of people stopping and asking what is wrong or what is going on came to a stop. The baby moved up high into the trees and all was calm until the crows attacked the baby and one of the adults. That is being discussed in a second article referenced below.

Was the impact on the owl family damaging? I do not think so and arguing with 20/20 hindsight is something I hate people doing. Different circumstances and different information mean it is an apples and oranges discussion. Same with the “it could happen, it is possible arguments. Childish statements about unknown factors that they want to be used to influence people, and try to make themselves look better than the person doing something instead of just talking.

With this coming to a close now the important question. What do you do the next time this happens? It will happen again but maybe not with a barred owl. How is that going to be handled? The answer is simple. No one knows as each time is different. I just hope people think about things and make good decisions. I also hope that a ranger like the ones I met during this is still around to deal with it, Nathan has a deep sense of appreciation for the animals and the park. The people who came every day to help monitor the owl family deserve some credit also. It took hours and several days of their time to try to ensure the health and safety of the animals by monitoring the area. After all, is said and done is that not what we want in the people and the rangers dealing with the park and the animals that make it their home?

