

# The Birds: The Release

written by Guest Contributor | June 21, 2021



The screech owl radiates a glowering, elfin beauty, her feathers a sienna red threaded with a riot of nut-brown and white streaks. The height of a mango, she's fully grown and weighs less than my heart, but she belongs to a species often mistaken for babies. At the release site, the same place where she was first discovered with a wing injury, my colleague Xen takes her in hand and gently tosses her skywards. She ascends and dips, steadies herself, then zings into the woods, disappearing in the same eyeblink it takes a shooting star to curve across the sky and die. I scan the trees, backlit by a harvest moon jack-o-lantern bright, but already she's flown deep inside the dense woodland, perching in a cavity or crook of a tree limb and blending in with the bark so perfectly that only the most seasoned birder, the one tipped off to her general whereabouts, would be able to spot her. Being audience to the release of a rehabilitated animal always generates the same twitch of frisson, the familiar goosebumps and thrumming feeling in my belly. It's a rare privilege to witness a wild animal return home, and as luck would have it, I'm granted access to this rite of restoration.

Entranced as I am, I'm no St Francis. I'm not even a virtuous pet owner. My wife takes better care of the tortoises than I do, and she's the one who cleans the cat litter. And the truth is that as a wildlife rehabber, I'd rather ration my time and energy for the select: the maimed and misfits of the animal kingdom, although theoretically I'd help all of them. But raccoons, the messiest of mammals, with a tendency to throw feces when they're bored? No thank you. Opossums, with their dank odor of musk and rotting carcass? Nope. But give me a chance to help an owl, a hawk, or even a peregrine, and I'm first in line, even if the latter tend to have the most traumatic injuries because they fly at the greatest velocity of all the birds: up to 240 mph. I would drop everything to participate in her rescue and rehabilitation.

I have my biases, my zoological preferences, but can anyone truly proclaim to love all animals? I don't mean theoretical love, the sweeping, all-aboard invitation to the ark kind of love, but a practical love that involves daily intimacies and exertions, like cleaning out cages festooned with rat guts or hosing down the bloody sanctum of a red tail hawk aviary in the spring. The love that involves trimming great horned owl talons even as he stares you

down with stove burner-eyes.

Here's two truths and a lie: I once denounced the entire species of great horned owls after one raked his talons across my head; I once tried to go on a hike in the winter with my exceptionally timid cat; I once succeeded in finding and rescuing a goose, hamstrung by fishing line, on a true wild goose chase. Confessions aside the truth is that I failed to rescue the goose just that morning. The goose had been last spotted in a park that abutted a run-down burger joint. Finding an injured animal, especially one as far-ranging as a goose, requires detective work, patience.

We reasoned that he couldn't have gone far, and though we canvassed the parking lot and park, the riverbank and road, we couldn't find a trace of him.

"He must be hunkered down somewhere." A wild goose chase indeed. So much brush, cattails and reeds, likely obstructed him. How would he fare with a fishing line pinched around his wings or webbed feet? Well enough to hide it seemed, but not enough to flourish. Or was it possible—possible, but not likely—that he slid out of it and flew off? We've been conditioned to be pragmatic, to expend our energy on those animals most likely to make it. Truth be told, the idea of a honking goose, a pummeling beak, a storm of wings, and an entire suite of goose weaponry on the ready made it easier to give up the chase after a couple of hours.

By contrast, the screech owl, a trooper, a true survivor, proved to be one of the lucky ones. Despite being struck by a car while diving for prey, she recovered within a few months and the wildlife sanctuary where I volunteer deemed her releasable. This is not the story of every injured raptor; in fact, the story of full rehabilitation and release is fairly rare. Although many are delivered from pain, brought back to a healthy weight with a regular diet of mice and expert care, they often are hit by cars and have significant injuries—a blind eye, a busted shoulder, for example—and would not survive life in the wild if released. These birds become educational "ambassadors," which we bring to schools, libraries, and festivals, teaching the young and old about their natural and personal history.

Screeches are often among the most favored of owls. Children can't take their eyes off of their blinky eyed faces, finding their stubby size and trill irresistible. "Sorry— you can't touch," I warn one, then another child. As cute as they are, screech owls can sink a beak or needle-sharp talon into a small finger or even pounce from my gloved arm onto a lap dog if I were to loosen my grip on its leash. But safe in my glove, the screech owls always have a willing and ready audience; this I've learned from so many school aged children, their arms pointing like compass needles, their hands reaching for the downy feathers of an owl chest. But I am her keeper, a needed barrier against their desire. All that clamoring to touch the feathery down of a pocket-sized creature.

I could insert here a cautionary tale on self-restraint in the face of feral beauty. When feeling threatened, the screech owl snaps her beak, sounding her own note of alarm. Clack, clack, the sound of your grandmother's dentures

rattling against each other in the back of her throat when she's angry. Or I could try to render my own enchantment on the night of the release: the moon fairly crackling with some kind of ineffable energy and the piebald deer with a chest as lunar white as a unicorn loping across the lawn as my car passed. I could write about Nature's give and take, its allowance of a second chance for one particular bird, and its human inflections, violations and incursions that may have robbed another of his life. I could write about the depths of my depression during these pandemic months and the buoying call for help: "Want to go on a goose chase with me, then help with a release?" and the giddiness bouncing suddenly in my throat, Yes! I could write of these things, follow the metaphorical impulses that would transfer her freedom that night to my own precarious sense of it, but I will let the screech owl's liberation be her own, let the moon's diffracted light through the tree limbs that November evening be all hers.

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**Sarah Giragosian** is the author of the poetry collection *Queer Fish*, a winner of the American Poetry Journal Book Prize (Dream Horse Press, 2017) and *The Death Spiral* (Black Lawrence Press, 2020). The craft anthology, *Marbles on the Floor: How to Assemble a Book of Poems*, which is co-edited by Sarah and Virginia Konchan, is forthcoming from The University of Akron Press. Sarah's writing has appeared in such journals as *Orion*, *Ecotone*, *Tin House*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. She teaches at the University at Albany-SUNY.

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