

Oakland Owlets' November 7, 2020 @ Stage Nature Center

On an unusually warm and pleasant afternoon, the Oakland Owlets met at the Stage Nature Center in Troy. The Stage Nature Center is a 100-acre nature preserve owned by the City of Troy and operated by the Troy Nature Society. The nature preserve was a popular destination for area residents on such a gorgeous day, reveling in the atypical sunshine of November. Young birders gathered to learn about owls, but first had a chance to look at the exhibits in the nature center before the presentation started.

A group of seventeen gathered under the outdoor pavilion near the nature center which allowed physical spacing so more young birders could attend this program. Naturalist Christina Funk discussed the special adaptation of Michigan Owls, using live owls, owl skulls, talons, and photographs. The Stage Nature Center maintains a collection of injured owls that cannot be released into the wild but serve as educational ambassadors for the species. The Stage Nature Center is constructing special housing for these owls that were inherited from the Organization for Bat Conservation.



Christina explained the incredible features that allow owls to hunt at night including their keen eyesight, silent flight, and powerful talons. Christina also introduced the group to two owl residents at the Center. Participants were able to see each owl up close while Christina patiently brought each owl within a few feet of everyone. Holding each owl, Christina noted the injuries that prevent these owls from release into the wild.



Mortimer, a gray phase Screech Owl, obediently perched on Christina's hand. As she moved between each group, participants were able to see Mortimer's ability to rotate his head while focusing on objects. Multi-tasking Christina played the two distinctive calls of the Screech Owl. The group asked questions while Mortimer listened intently.

The second owl, Samantha was vocalizing during much of Christina's presentation. Calling "Who Cooks for you 'all", Samantha or "Sam" is a larger Barred Owl. Barred owls have rounded heads without any ear tufts and deep brown, almost black eyes centered inside of the facial disk. These features are striking. Sam was attacked by a dog before she was able to fly. The surgery to repair her injured wing was not completely successful and Sam could not be returned to the wild. At an early age, Sam was raised by people and she has imprinted on humans. Sam was much more reactive to noise than Mortimer.

After Christina's thorough and comprehensive presentation, darkness settled, and the group readied for a night hike to look for owls. Christina mentioned that both Great-horned and Eastern Screech Owls had been seen on the nature preserve. Owl prowl rules and ethics were shared. The group listened to the calls of both owls and practiced standing still before moving on to the trail.



The group hiked a short distance and stood quietly to listen for several minutes. The clear sky and the starlight revealed the bare branches and silhouettes of the tall trees towering overhead. Christina played the call of the Screech Owl initially and everything stopped. After a short time, a distant call was heard. Christina explained this was the mating call of the female Great-horned owl which had nested in the past in a nearby woods along another trail. Christina offered to hike the group to the nest location, but this would extend the prowl beyond the end time.

Most of the group agreed to hike further to explore this distance call. A line of people winded through the pathway in the dark. No one objected to the lack of light. Passing by



many tall trees and intently listening for sounds the group of twelve people quietly progressed to a stop in the forest. Listening for several minutes, the group was able to hear the repeated calls of a female Great-horned owl. The call was unlike the hooting that is associated with the Great-horned owl. It was a unique experience to learn some new night sounds. We returned to the Nature Center without actually seeing owls but were enlightened by our time outdoors.

A special thank you to Christina Funk and the Stage Nature Center for a terrific program. Thanks as well to all of the young birders and friends that attended. It was another beautiful day outdoors.

For information about OAS field trip committee health guidelines visit <https://www.oaklandaudubon.org/field-trips>

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