

Conservation Bulletin

Goals and impacts of the International Festival of Owls in Houston, Minnesota, USA

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The International Festival of Owls began in 2003 simply as a hatch-day party for Alice the Great Horned Owl, a permanently injured Great Horned Owl that worked as an educational ambassador at the Houston Nature Center. The Houston Nature Center serves as the trailhead for the Root River Trail, a regionally popular paved 96 km recreational trail used heavily by bicyclists. It has twin goals of environmental education and tourism, so the Festival seemed like a good way to bring the goals together into one event.



PHOTO 1: Karla and Alice with the crowd.

Houston, Minnesota is in a rural location, with about 13 people/km² and only 979 in the city itself. The first Festival included educational programs with live owls and crafts, and 300 people attended. As more activities were added to the Festival in successive years, we soon had people flying in to attend from as far as 3,000 km away. It was then that we realized that there was no other event like it in North America, and people would travel for the opportunity to see live owls and learn more about them.

In 2006 we added the World Owl Hall of Fame awards to bring public recognition to people and owls doing outstanding things to make the world a better place for owls. The nominations are judged by a panel of five owl experts from four different countries, and the winners often come to the Festival to receive their awards. At this stage we added "International" to the name, since some people assumed it was just a small, local event.

As the Festival has grown, other groups have been asked to participate. The Boy Scouts help people build owl nest boxes (and keep the profit), the Lutheran Church

hosts a pancake breakfast where the pancakes look like owl faces (and the church keeps the profit), a local garden club hosts a Meet and Greet for the Hall of Fame award winners and our members with owl-themed hors d'oeuvres.

The Festival eventually added an international owl art competition for children, which had nearly 700 entries from 27 countries in 2018, an owl photography contest with nearly 100 entries, a kids' owl calling contest, face painting, vendors selling owl-themed goods, a raffle, a selfie station, bus trips to see owls, a banquet, pellet dissection, and more crafts for children.



PHOTO 2: Hooting contest 2008.

As the Festival grew, we realized that there was no all-owl educational facility in the United States, only general raptor centres. So we started the International Owl Center, a non-profit facility where people can come to learn about owls year-round. The Owl Center opened in 2015 and took over the Festival from the Houston Nature Center.

The Festival is held at the first weekend in March each year because it is the time when Great Horned Owls hatch in the area. It is a good time for local businesses because there is very little, if any, tourism in that time of year. There are also very few other events going on that time of year because the weather can be unpredictable: it can vary from blizzards to sunny and 15°C.

The Festival is successful in this format because people in North America generally like owls and love the opportunity to see a live owl up close as they are very difficult to find in the wild. Birds are heavily regulated in the United States, and special training, permits, and facility

inspections are required to use owls in educational programs. They are not allowed to be kept as pets, so we don't have to be concerned that people who see the live owl programs will go out and get an owl as a pet (as is possible in some countries).

The Festival itself has several goals:

1. Teach people about owls and how humans affect them.
2. Inspire people to care about owls enough to take action in their lives to help owls.
3. Raise money for the International Owl Center (formerly the Houston Nature Center).
4. Bring tourists to Houston to benefit the local economy.



ALAN STANKOVITZ

PHOTO 3: Houston with Brownies.

The Festival has some unintended beneficial outcomes. World Owl Hall of Fame award winners come from different countries from around the world, and usually 2-3 are able to attend each year (range 1-5.) The Festival allows these people to share research, educational methods, and other ideas with each other while getting ideas from the Festival itself.



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PHOTO 4: Gina with Barn Owl.

For example, Jonathan Haw from South Africa and Lisa Owens Viani from the USA both work to lessen the use

of rodenticides. They now have met in person and plan to collaborate in some educational efforts.

Sometimes the Hall of Fame awards themselves have given award winners leverage. For instance, Tracy Eccles in South Africa used the publicity of the World Owl Hall of Fame award for Pot Plant Owl, a Spotted Eagle Owl that nested on her balcony and was live-streamed to the world, to stop the destruction of a wetland. Tracy used the publicity from the award to show city officials that the world was watching, since the wetland was where Pot Plant Owl's family hunted. The development was finally denied.

After his visit to the Festival in 2011, Raju Acharya started a sister festival in Nepal to educate people about owls. The Nepal Owl Festival shares some similarities with the International Festival of Owls, but is adjusted to work with the Nepalese culture. Marco Mastorilli started the Festival de Gufi (festival of owls) in Italy after discovering our event online. Jonathan Haw from South Africa and Suruchi and Satish Pande, a couple from India would like to start a similar festival in their respective countries.



ALAN STANKOVITZ

PHOTO 5: International Festival of Owls, Houston Minnesota.

People in North America and Europe generally only harm owls inadvertently. Education about owls is encouraging people to change small behaviours to avoid harming owls, with a cumulative positive impact on the environment. But education about owls in parts of Asia and Africa is much more critical due to the cultural attitudes and illegal trade. I feel the most important outcome of the International Festival of Owls is passionate individuals spreading the concept of owl festival to countries in these areas.

Biosketch

KARLA BLOEM is the Executive Director of the International Owl Center. She has been conducting owl education programs for 20 years and studying Great Horned Owl vocalizations for 14 years. She began the International Festival of Owls in 2003.