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Project Perch's BuOw Blog 16

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Trash: Just One of the Problems Facing Burrowing Owls

On Tuesday, a park patron at Vista View was walking by and noticed Mother Owl's entangled foot and took some pictures. Hair or minnow net? I don't think we ever got the answer to that question. The park patron showed the pictures to Kelli Whitney, the park naturalist, and she forwarded them to the South Florida Wildlife Care Center ("Care Center"). They called to see if I was available to go out there, but it turned out one of their ambulance drivers was in the area, so he responded instead.



When I was at the Care Center on Thursday, I asked how the owl was doing and found out that they were unable to catch her. So I called the park naturalist, who said the owl was able to get about half of it off of her foot, but that parts were constricting her leg. Her leg had swollen and she needed the netting removed, but they couldn't catch her. She was a mother with four owlets, and so she was sticking very close to the burrow, quickly retreating whenever they went near her.

So I called Ernest Leupin, a local biologist who used to work on a captive breeding program for the Burrowing Owl Conservation Society up in British Columbia, Canada to see if he thought he could catch her. When I described her situation, he said sure, he had a method, a cardboard trap door of sorts, where she could be caught without causing her any more injury or stress, and it should be relatively quick. On Friday, we all met out at the park and watched as Ernest set up his trap door. He then set the trap door, which was pulled taught using a fishing line. Once set, the owl could be flushed down into the burrow and trapped in the door as she tried to enter. Ernest laid down in the grass with the fishing pole, pulled the door tight and we waited for the owl to return to the burrow.



She finally came back and we flushed her into the burrow. Then the male owl jumped over his mate and beat her down into the trap. So it was the male we had caught. We joked he was a chicken owl, every owl for itself when push came to shove. So Ernest reset the trap and we waited. Mother Owl was wary. She could hear her owlets calling from behind the trap door, but was uneasy about going down into the burrow. We tried to flush her 2 more times, but she always flew away instead of going down in the burrow. So we set the trap and left it there, hoping she would cross over the cardboard a couple of times and get used to it. Then we could come back and catch her.

When we returned, she was standing near the entrance but when we went to flush her down into the burrow, she tried to fly away, but she was tangled. She had tried to excavate the trap door out of the burrow entrance and had gotten tangled in the fishing line that held the door taut. This was not how we had hoped to catch her, but we now had her. Ernest used nail clippers to remove the netting from around her leg, but parts of it were too tight, and her leg was cut and bloody. Her foot was so swollen, we couldn't tell if she still had use of her talons, so we put her in the carrier and drove her to the Care Center. This was the scenario none of us wanted for this mother of four young babies.

When I got to the Care Center, they had feeding guidelines for young screech owls. Ernest had estimated the young to be 3-4 weeks old. So the park naturalist set up a feeding schedule and they began prepping crickets and mice for the owlets, two times a day, one mouse per owlet per day. Park staff made sure to wear camouflage, sunglasses and gloves so the babies wouldn't imprint on humans. Father Owl would immediately take the food down to the babies who devoured all the rodent pieces being delivered. Father Owl was still hunting and bringing back frogs, voles and insects.



Ernest thought she probably had “prey confusion”, when she saw this netting moving around and mistook it for a small furry rodent, grabbed it and then couldn’t get it off of her foot. As she pulled at it to get it off, parts of it tightened on her leg causing a restriction that would have cost her the leg and ultimately her life.



Luckily, while Father Owl did his part and the park staff did their part, the Care Center did their part. Dr. Gardner got everything out of Mother Owl’s wound, put her on medication, and her leg was soaked in warm water to try and speed up the healing time. Everyone was focused on getting her back to her babies.

The following Thursday, 6 days after she was admitted, the swelling was gone and she could use her talons. The wound was healing nicely. So Ernest gave her a ride back home to be reunited with her family. He placed her back in the burrow and then a scuffle ensued, as though Father Owl was saying, “Hey, where have you been and this was no time for a holiday.” After a few minutes things settled down and the brief release was over. She was home. Soon the family was hanging out together. Her babies had grown while she was away, and now they could come out of the burrow.



Patti Roth, a freelance writer, pitched Mother Owl’s story to the Broward/Palm Beach New Times and soon she was collecting background information and photographs for inclusion in the article. She asked me to write a quote, so I wrote “When our trash is not disposed of properly it poses a grave hazard to all of our wildlife, our pets and us too. It would be great if we could prevent it from happening altogether, but it is nice when we can just undo the damage our trash has caused.” If my quote was included, it was cut by the editor, but I was pleased when the final story said “Trapping her was a multiday project accomplished with assistance from a pair of local owl biologists affiliated with the South Florida Audubon Society, Kelly Heffernan and Ernest Leupin. We had done our part too.



Mother Owl's story was a good one. A lot of people had helped her and her family out. Ernest took some great pictures of the family while he waited for the young to welcome mom home. A very happy ending for this Mother Owl and her babies.



This baby seemed to say, "Hey Mom, we're glad you're back."

Picture Credits: Park Patron, Kelli Whitney, the South Florida Wildlife Care Center and Ernest Leupin.