

# Hinterlands Who's Who: Birding, Multiplicity, and Barn Owls

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## The Barn Owl

The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) is a medium-sized, tawny coloured owl that, with the exception of Antarctica, has worldwide distribution. Like most owls the Barn Owl is considered to be nocturnal. Like all owls, it is predatory bird. In the Barn Owl's case, members of the species are said to enjoy (or *specialize*, in the biological parlance) in small ground mammals—rodents, for example. In Eastern North America, the majority of their diet would include Meadow Voles (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) and Deer Mice (*Peromyscus maniculatus*). Barn Owls strike a distinct-look with their lack of ear tufts (a misnomer of sorts as the tufts—the “horns” of a Great Horned Owl, *Bubo virginianus*—are not ears and not associated with hearing at all) and their distinct heart-shaped facial disc (which is associated with hearing, but that's another story for another time). As their common name suggests they can be found living in barns, on a nest made from the regurgitated un-digestible remains of those Meadow Voles and Deer Mice they hunt. Of course Barn Owls are not just limited to barns, but nest in silos, abandoned buildings and tree cavities too. Arguably, this should make their name “Barn, Silo, Abandoned Building & Tree Cavity Owl” but that doesn't really roll off the tongue in the same way.

These attributes and distinguishing features are all things to keep in mind if you find yourself out birdwatching near a barn in Southern Ontario. During your explorations, while there are certain to be Rock Pigeons (*Columba livia*) fluttering about, if you happen to come across a Barn Owl in this setting, you should take notice. Seeing Barn Owl in Southern Ontario (especially a *living* Barn Owl) is something to make special note of—it's not a regular occurrence. Part of the significance of seeing a Barn Owl lies in its relative *in*-abundance. While individuals identified as *Tyto alba* enjoy a cosmopolitan reputation, Southern Ontario has been considered the northern range of the species (“Ontario Barn Owl Recovery Project,” 2005) and it has been suggested that Barn Owls has always found, say, *other* places more to their liking. Because of this, the Barn Owl is a special bird in Canada: it is officially *endangered*, recognized by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) (“Ontario Barn Owl Recovery Project,” 2005). It seems as though Barn Owls living in Ontario have had bad luck of late—of the “handful” (“Ontario Barn Owl Recovery Project,” 2005 ¶ 4) that have been seen since 1999, two were roadkills (“Ontario Barn Owl Recovery Project,” 2005) and no breeding pairs have been “confirmed.”

## ***The Barn Owl of February 27<sup>th</sup> 2006***

If you are a serious birder in Ontario, with a computer and internet access, it is likely that you are aware of the electronic mailing list called *Ontbirds*. *Ontbirds* is presented by the self-proclaimed provincial birding association, the Ontario Field Ornithologists. The electronic mailing list (or listserv) is meant to be a clearing-house of bird sightings and directions for interested birders: you read about a bird you would like to see, get the directions and off you go on (perhaps literal) the wild goose chase. On average, four to seven sightings are posted daily. As might be expected, more postings occur on the weekend, and more postings occur seasonally during spring and fall migration. Typical emails follow a standard form: the subject line contains the bird or birds seen and their location while the body of the email contains more specific information about the birds and precise directions to the location they might be found. While thorough, the information shared is, generally speaking, pretty uncontentious stuff. So, it was with interest that a seemingly normal post on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006 took on new dimensions: whispers of deception, accusation of fraud and more interestingly for my work, questions of what is normal, known and natural all emerged.

On February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006, a simple posting appeared in mailboxes of subscribers outlining how a photograph had been taken of a Barn Owl and posted on a web-based photography site. A URL was given linking to the photograph. It was noted that the photographer had not reported seeing the bird on the *Ontbirds* listserv, but that there was a link to the location where the bird was seen. That same day, the moderator of the listserv posted reminding the subscribers that the Barn Owl was considered “endangered” on breeding territory and that there were rules about posting about endangered birds on the listserv; all of the requirements that needed to be met prior to posting were created in order to reduce the likelihood that an observed bird would abandon a nest or breeding attempt.

The following day, March 1<sup>st</sup>, a conversation had begun via the listserv. Another poster was interested in knowing more details about the sighting and if the bird had been seen again. The next email later that day was from the person who had taken the photograph himself. In the email, he describes though he did not remember exactly where he saw the bird, he used Google maps to locate the general location and road names. According to his directions, the Barn Owl was seen in Eastern Ontario, in the Ottawa region. As well, he shared the story of finding the owl, taking the photograph and watching the bird fly away from him. The author also shared that his initial reason for going out birding that day was to find Snowy Owls to photograph and that he had no luck in finding those birds that day.

On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, another email arrived from another *Ontbirds* subscriber. In it, the author begins to make claims to the authenticity of the photograph. This email suggests that the owl’s feet have been “doctored” as though something was removed after the photograph had been taken. The author reminds those reading that the Barn Owl is rare for Ontario and especially so where the photograph was taken—the implication being that the bird is so rare that it most likely didn’t exist.

A third email follows on March 2<sup>nd</sup> in which the author suggests that there is nothing in the photograph that appears unusual or doctored. The author offers another suggestion about the authenticity of the owl. He reminds us that there was a Barn Owl sighting in a different part of Ontario earlier in the winter and attributes the owl's presence not to digital photographic magic, but to efforts undertaken on the part of humans to help the species recover.

Yet, this claim to reality does not seem to be working. Later in the afternoon on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, a fourth email arrives that supports the initial hypothesis that the photograph has been doctored. The author shares that the bird looks like one he had seen at Parc Omega, a wildlife park, in Québec and provides a URL to a photograph of the Parc Omega Barn Owl.

The pull of the network to make the photograph unauthentic, and in turn, the owl, continues to mount. In a fifth email, the author he shares the contention that the fencepost the Barn Owl is pictured perching on was specially made for captive birds to land on. The author also suggests that given the lighting of the photograph and kind of weather that was observed on the day that the photograph was supposed to have been taken, the photograph could not be discounted as being genuine.

This is where the conversation ends on *Ontbirds*. At 5:30 pm on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the listserv co-ordinator posted a message that states that the current conversation on the photographed Barn Owl is inappropriate. The co-ordinator reminded readers that *Ontbirds* is not a discussion list and is for “reporting birds period.” The closing line in the email reminds readers that not following the guidelines could result in the restriction or loss of being able to post to the listerv.

This does not mean, however, that the conversation ended. In following the network thread to a website that catalogues rare birds from the Ottawa area, the sighting details for the Barn Owl seen on February 27<sup>th</sup> is prefaced with the words “LIKELY HOAX.” The page author outlines a litany of evidence that supports his claim that the image has been manipulated. The webpage author concludes his outline with the statement “let the viewer beware.”

### ***Enacting birds: reflection on the Barn Owl of February 27<sup>th</sup>***

I have spent some time thinking about the birders and the Barn Owl. I have read and reflected on the emails and the allegations. From this, themes have emerged concerning the construction of what is *natural* as well as insights into the creation of what John Law (2004b) calls “naturecultures.” Most importantly, this event, be it framed as authentic bird sighting or elaborate hoax helps enact and make visible a topology of inter-species ethical relations between those who watch birds and the birds they watch.

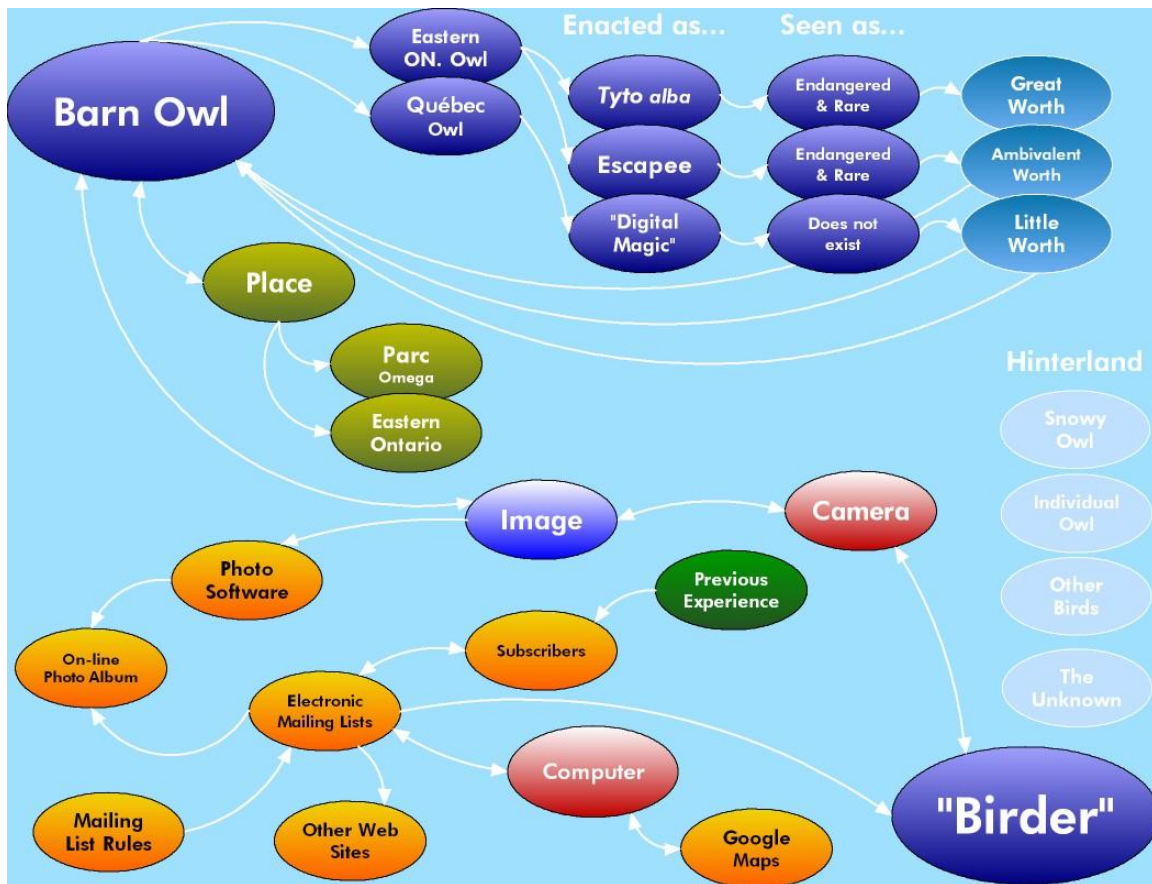


Figure 1: Set of relations enacted in this Barn Owl sighting

## Networks

*Ontbirds* operates within an established network of relations. People post their sightings to share with other interested birders. The process through which experiences are transcribed from embodied encounters to textual references is seemingly an invisible one. In this case, there were visible deviations from the established network. Within the birding community that posts to *Ontbirds*, the claim to have “found” a bird is an important one. In posts where the author is reporting a first-sighting and they did not find the bird themselves, the name of the bird finder (skilled, lucky or otherwise, as it is never suggested the kind of effort it took to come across the bird) is included. In this example, the finder did not make a submission to *Ontbirds* to report rare bird. Rather, it seems like in this case, the first-poster came across an on-line gallery created by the finder that had the photograph and birding information on it. While never overtly stated, I believe that the authenticity of the Barn Owl was partially called into question due to the fact that the finder of the bird *did not* post his sighting to the listserv.

Additionally, I find interesting to note in the finder’s one email to the *Ontbirds* listserv, he did his best to fit into the established network. However, problematic for him, he was not familiar with the area where he took the photograph. Part of the established *Ontbirds* network is knowing where you observed a bird; the more detailed the description of location and directions, the better.

In networks, effort is required to maintain relationships of the actors. The listserv tends to operate with little what I would call *boundary policing* on the part of the co-ordinator. What is particularly interesting about the Barn Owl postings was the need of the *Ontbirds* co-ordinator to make comments concerning the type and quality of postings over the three day period, all referencing the mail about the Barn Owl. In well-established networks, subtle deviations from the established routine lead to powerful reactions: networks tend to become visible when they are threatened. The questioning of the authenticity seems to be such a reaction.

What this suggests for a birding network is the power that lies in the focus on names, dates and details. This hybridity that exists between birder and the electronic mailing list certainly has implications in shaping what is considered normal, known and natural for those who subscribe to the list. Birds are enacted through *Ontbirds* as realities “out there” to be discovered, recorded and reported. While this is not necessarily that surprising, it does, in turn have an impact on other enactments of birds, especially visible in the multiple objects created.

### **Multiple objects**

In this case there was an exceeding focus by birders on the *rarity* of the bird, to the point where I believe that the Barn Owl became a multiple object. What is a multiple object, you ask? Emerging from the field of Science and Technology studies, the idea of multiple objects (for this idea discussed in more detail, see Law, 2004a; Mol, 2002) opens a new way to think about the taken-for-granted: objects are often thought of being rigid and immobile in their existence—a Barn Owl will always be a Barn Owl. In response to this, a multiple version of the object counters this singularity. In focusing on the fractal nature of “reality” and in attend to difference I believe that this perspective is more sophisticated as it requires an investigator to, bring these multiples forward rather than collapsing them. I believe that it is fair to say that a focus on objects is filled with attention to the many ways that actors, human and otherwise, engage to create a reality: a reality described through investigation, a reality that is not the only one “out there” and a reality that focuses on heterogeneity and difference.

In such a *becoming*, the enactment of rarity overshadowed the other ways the bird was known (see Figure 2). Rather than having to pass judgement on if I think the Barn Owl was properly enacted, I think it is more valuable to examine the ways the bird was enacted. Let me outline the different ways:

- as a rare bird species (through the *Ontbirds* coordinator, external web pages and some birders’ previous knowledge)
- as a biological reality (through the email that suggested the Owl was a result of species rebound and human conservation efforts)
- as digital magic (many of the claims to digital alteration of the photograph enacted this Barn Owl)
- as an Eastern Ontario Barn Owl (through the initial posting)
- as an Québec Barn Owl (through the claims it came from Parc Omega)

There have also been subtle and tacit ways that the authenticity has been enacted, framed through the network of discovery, recording and reporting previously described. Through these discourses, the Barn Owl has been enacted as a:

- valuable, wild bird
- feral bird of ambivalent worth
- wildlife park captive and therefore *does not count*

In this multiplicity, the Barn Owl lost value in the eyes of some birders as its authenticity was called into question. What is implicit in this questioning is the understanding that there is some kind of a continuum that reported birds are judged against. It seems that the gold standard of authenticity is one that is wild, rare and (relatively) easy to find. It goes without saying that this perspective is not entirely unproblematic.

This, in part, helps explain why there are not any postings to *Ontbirds* describing a flock of Pigeons seen in Keswick. A Pigeon simply does not match up to the gold standard of valuable birds. In deciding what gets to “count” in knowledge-making endeavours, and what counts as the gold standard, other birds disappear from what is noticed. In that disappearance, the bird moves to the hinterland. Both birds enacted as species, such as is the case with Pigeons and birds enacted as individuals. I turn to that next.

### **The hinterland and otherness**

The second post in this chain made explicit that the individual Barn Owl was, in fact, part of larger species, *Tyto alba* and that species was considered to be an endangered one. The term endangered species does just that: focus on *species*, at the expense of the individual. In this organism’s identification as a member of a species, it loses any ability to be something else; what could be has been othered. This act of othering is at times common birdwatching. It occurs more than once in the Barn Owl discussion. For example, through the questioning about the validity of the sighting, the focus subtly shifts from the sighting to determining the authenticity of the photograph. Again, the individual disappears.

The Barn Owl was not the only member of the order *Aves* to be othered. It is also interesting to note that the Snowy Owls that were the original object of the outing that produced the Barn Owl. Likely, there were other birds seen during that trip, but for whatever reason (not rare, not big, not charismatic) were ignored. For my purposes, I consider this othering of the individual problematic.

My own perspective on why the nonhuman needs to be seen as equal comes a basis of multi-centrism (Weston, 2004) and integral worth. At the centre of this perspective is an ethical alignment with and respect for individuals. When, through certain acts, the individual disappears, I believe that it lays bare a different alignment. The challenge here is that the act of othering is not inherently *wrong*. It is true that there might be other enactments that exist in the hinterland, without my knowledge. However, rather than focusing on what *might* be out there, I believe that it is important be able to recognize enactments that are politically aligned with the kind of relationship *ought* to exist. So one needs to develop the act of attending to what is observably cast to the hinterland. Through

this attention, judgements about othered enactments' importance to your own ethical or political alignment can be made and in turn, you can be even more intentional in your "ontological politics" (Mol, 2002). Through this attentiveness, the opportunity then presents itself to intentionally enact a reality that is more in line with your own ethics.

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