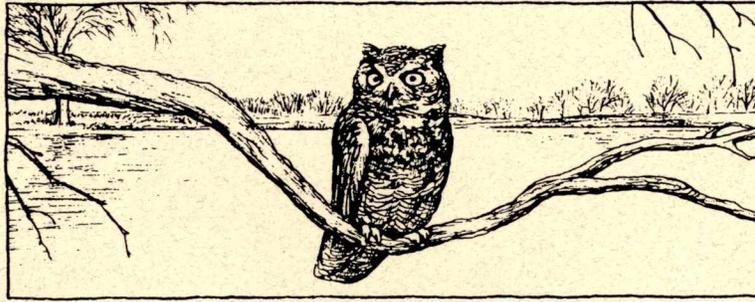


STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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OWLS: Harbingers of Death

--Mark Spreyer

*It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman,
Which gives the stern'st good-night...
I heard the owl shrieking and the crickets cry.*

--Macbeth, Act II, Sc. 2

That owls are familiar Halloween icons is just the latest incarnation of a human fascination with owls that predates recorded history. The oldest illustration of a bird that can be identified to species is a drawing of a Snowy Owl that was scratched on a wall in a French cave at least 20,000 years ago. Because this cave was used by early humans as a sanctuary, it is believed that these birds symbolized religious or magical powers.

These powers might have included warning humans of an impending death. The owl's association with doom can be traced back to the Mesopotamian goddess of Death, Lilith, who was typically flanked by owls. Along with her owl entourage, a Sumerian tablet of 2,300 - 2,000 B.C. shows Lilith with wings, talons in place of toes, and sporting a headdress of horns.

It is likely that these ancient Middle East beliefs influenced the early Greeks because the owl became the symbol of Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and warfare. Athenians believed their warrior goddess would sometimes help them on the battlefield. In the battle of Marathon against the Persians, the Athenians believed Athena assumed

the form of an owl and led them to victory from overhead.

Around 77 B.C., Pliny the Elder, a Roman scholar, and author of *Historia Naturalis*, collected information about a variety of subjects, including owls. He tried to dispel the notion that an owl was symbolic of doom. He wrote that, on more than one occasion, he had seen an owl perched on a private

house and had later learned that nothing untoward had happened to any of the houses' occupants. Public places, however, were a different matter. Pliny wrote that the "owle betokeneth always some heavy news, and is most execrable and accursed in the presaging of public affairs..."

During the Middle Ages, the early Christian church saw the owl as the perfect symbol of evil. After all, it is a creature of darkness, makes a haunting

sound, perches upright not unlike a standing human, and stares at you with two piercing yellow eyes that are arranged, much like ours, on the front of its head. What a perfect little demon!

Shakespeare often used the owl as a bird of ill-omen. In *Macbeth*, for example, at the moment her husband is about to kill King Duncan, Lady Macbeth speaks the opening quotation to this article.

On this side of the Atlantic, the owl was viewed as a harbinger of death as well. According to a tribal elder of the Oto-Missouri tribe:

The owl is the one that gives the death warning. The owl that's got the horns they are the ones



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that warn you. ... Hear them in the distance, it never fails, never fails, death is close.

It should not be surprising to learn that, here in Illinois, owl bones have been found as grave offerings in sites of the prehistoric Mississippian culture.

Some Sierra tribes of California believed that the Great Horned Owl, one of those "that's got the horns," seized the souls of the dead and transported them to the other world. Also from the West Coast, the Newuk Indians believed that the virtuous among them became Great Horned Owls while the wicked were cursed to become Barn Owls.

Much as Athena's owl did at Marathon, a Pima Chief describes how an owl aided his tribe against the Apaches:

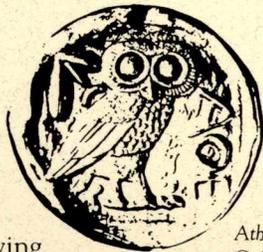
...[the owl] looked about and saw my plan...
He cut the power of the enemy, their springs, their trees,
their dreams. ... He bit off their flesh and sinews, and
made holes in their bones....

In Athens, the Little Owl was common in the city and another source of inspiration for owl folklore. In the Western Hemisphere, we have a close relative of Athena's bird, the Burrowing Owl. Since it nests in old prairie dog burrows, this owl is, in a literal sense, of the underworld.

The association of the Burrowing Owl with doom was made by the Hopi Indians who identified this bird with their god of the dead, Masau'u. However, being this god's symbol was not necessarily a bad thing. Masau'u's realm included all things under the ground. So, the Burrowing Owl's deity was also in charge of germinating seeds and growing crops. All in all, the owl was smiled upon by the Hopi.

Can a bird of darkness and the underworld also be a source of humor? Yes, according to W.H. Davies, whose poem concludes this article. In the meantime, if you're out on Halloween and hear an owl hooting, don't worry. It has nothing to say about your future. On the other hand, if you're scheduled to take a flight the next day, you might want to reconsider.

*The boding Owl, that in despair
Doth moan and shiver on warm nights--
Shall this bird prophesy for me
The fall of Heavens eternal lights?
When in the thistled field of Age
I take my final walk on earth,
Still will I make that Owl's despair
A thing to fill my heart with mirth.*



Athenian
Coin

PROGRAMS

Program Basics: PLEASE CALL or fax us at 428-OWLS(6957), or email Stillman at: stillinc@flash.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs (except for bird banding open houses). Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending. *Please, no scout groups.*

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the activity) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

MORNING BIRD WALKS

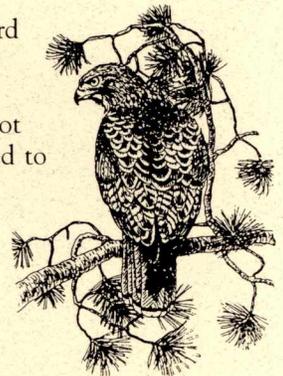
Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does.

Date: Sept. 19 & Oct. 17
Time: 8:00AM
Fee: None
Age: 10 years and up

BIRD BANDING

Watch Mark Spreyer (a licensed bird bander) measure, weigh, tag and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Banding birds is not always predictable, so come prepared to hike the trails. If it is raining, the demonstration will be cancelled.

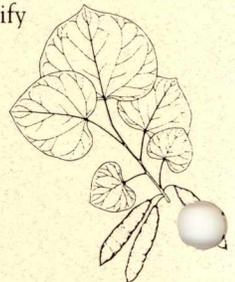
Date: Sunday, Oct. 3
Time: 9:00AM to Noon
Fee: None



TREE I.D. OR THIS BUD'S FOR YOU!

As the leaves turn color, join Stillman's naturalist as he shows you how to identify some of our Midwestern trees. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will inspire you to open your own "branch office." Come prepared to be out in the weather.

Date: Sunday, Oct. 10
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None



COMPOSING COMPOST

Organic yard and kitchen byproducts used to account for over 15% of the solid waste produced each year. Now, thanks to composting, more and more people have learned how to transform organic waste into a useful garden fertilizer. Join us as volunteers Diane Greening and Vicki Klein demonstrate ways that you can transform leaves and grass clippings into a rich soil conditioner.

Date: Sunday, Oct. 17
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None

TWILIGHT WILDLIFE HIKE

If you have ever wanted to investigate and interpret wildlife signs, take a night hike or sharpen your senses to the sights, sounds and smells of the outdoors, then this evening is for you! The activities you will do come from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's "Watching Wildlife" program and we are delighted to have **Cyndi Duda**, from the Barrington Fish & Wildlife office, on hand to lead us from daylight into darkness.

Casual clothes and good hiking shoes or boots are required. If you have to leave early, that's O.K.
Call 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Saturday, Oct. 23
Time: 5:00 to 7:00PM
Age: 6 years and up
Fee: None

BACKYARD BIRD FEEDERS

Stillman volunteers Roy Schodtler and Jim Kaltsas invite you to try your hand at making bird feeders out of common materials. There's no better way to add color to your winter yard than by attracting birds to your own feeder. Call 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Sunday, Nov. 7
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None



WINTER HOURS BEGIN IN NOVEMBER

In September and October, Stillman will be open Sundays from 9 AM to 4 PM. Starting in November, Stillman will be open Sundays from 1 PM to 4 PM.

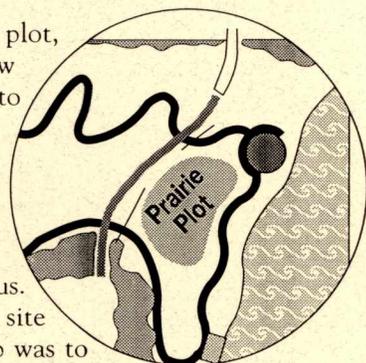
Please note that the Stillman Nature Center is also available, by reservation, during the week to school classes. For a brochure that describes the programs and fees, just call or email us at stillnc@flash.net and we'll be happy to send you one.

THANK YOU

--Daria Sapp

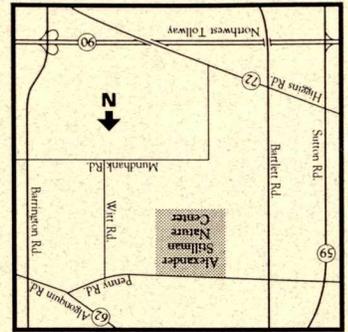
Our Accessibility Trail has a thriving prairie demonstration plot thanks to the hard work of Lucia Lykke who is entering Barrington High School this fall.

Lucia took on this plot, located between the new dock and Penny Road, to meet her community service requirement for the National Junior Honor Society at the Barrington Middle School - Station Campus. As the proposed prairie site was a lawn, her first job was to remove the sod, a difficult and strenuous task.



Once the sod was removed, Lucia planted several flats of prairie flowers into the prepared soil. Next, she broadcast approximately thirty species of prairie seeds into the area. Some seeds need to be processed before they can be planted. For example, butterfly weed, a member of the milkweed family, has seeds that hang from a tuft of filaments that act like a parachute, allowing the seed to be dispersed by the wind. Lucia had to separate the seeds from the tufts-- the wheat from the chaff, as it were-- before they could be planted.

She also participated in other prairie related activities such as removing young buckthorn plants. All in all, Lucia did not choose an easy project for her community service requirement. Nonetheless, she tackled the work with enthusiasm and commitment. She should be proud that thanks to her efforts people who have been physically unable to visit a prairie will be able to watch her prairie plantings grow and mature in the coming years. We at the Stillman Nature Center congratulate her on a job well done.



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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

- Yes, I'd like to become a member of the Stillman Nature Center. I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$_____.
- I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.
- Please send a gift membership from _____ to the name and address listed below.

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