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Carl Trichka

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Nautical owls

Carl Trichka

On a dreary Sunday afternoon in late June, when the skies threatened to open and drench the area with rain, I received a phone call from Milan Bull, Director of Connecticut Audubon Natural History Center. In his usual coherent manner he blurted out something about banding some nestling Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) at the Housatonic Marina in Stratford, CT. "I'll pick you up in half an hour" — click!

Having been a bird bander for seven years, handling tiny warblers to Herring Gulls, I became somewhat apprehensive about trying my hand with owls. There are documented stories of banders who, while attempting to band young hawks or owls, have been set upon by the irate parents. My idea of a rewarding experience was not receiving severe lacerations about the head and backside while placing a band on the leg of one of the offspring. During the drive out to the marina, we bolstered our confidence by asking who in the group knew how to apply butterfly sutures to open flesh wounds and holding a raffle to see who would offer himself as sacrifice if the parents showed up.

Nesting Barn Owls in this part of the state are very rare, and we would be excited just to see them. A search through the Nesting Season issues of *American Birds* from 1947 to 1979 revealed little data as to their abundance or lack thereof. There are a few scattered reports of nesting Barn Owls in New York, Rhode Island, and New Jersey. The only Connecticut nesting record was in 1979 in Lakeville, which is a rural farming area.

The southwestern part of the state has been extensively developed over the years, resulting in a rapid loss of farming land. Those farms that linger on have replaced their wooden barns and silos with metal structures — perhaps to the detriment of Barn Owls.

The Barn Owl has been "Blue Listed" by *American Birds*, but northeastern correspondents have favored de-listing the species in recent years. On the other hand, researchers in northern New Jersey blame site scarcity for the species' decline and state that their true status as a breeding species remains unknown.

Arriving at the marina, we were surprised to learn where the nest was located. The marina has two large metal sheds with steel racking. The boats are stacked



four high and about twenty wide. A large lift truck is used to remove the boats from the racks and place them in the water. The nest was located under a canvas tarpaulin that covered a boat which was in the top tier of the rack.

The adult owls were not in the area and, breathing a sigh of relief, we asked the marina owner to remove the boat and lower it to the ground. Peeking under the tarpaulin, we saw two young owls, one at each side of the cockpit windshield. We donned leather gloves, loosened the tarpaulin, and took the owls from the boat — one at a time. They remained very calm during the disturbance and handling. Keeping one eye on their talons and the other on the sky for the parents, we banded both youngsters (1237-30011 & 30012) and returned them to the safety of the boat. The boat was then returned to its niche on the rack.

Later, we talked to the owner of the boat, who did not seem too upset that he was going to lose the use of his boat for the next week or two until the birds fledged. He was concerned about their welfare and accepted the circumstances for what they were.

During the ride home, we commented about the unusual nest site, but wondered who was going to clean out the boat so it could be enjoyed by the owner. The top of the bow and the cockpit were covered with pounds of mouse fur, regurgitated pellets and excrement, not to mention the odor. Had the boat belonged to one of us, we would have had it launched, doused with a flammable liquid, and given a true Viking burial at sea. ♦

65 Glover Street, Fairfield, CT 06430