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Barn Owls and Witches: Why Do Superstitions in Mexico Have Impacted the Life of This Animal

Tyto Alba, widely known as barn owl or Lechuza in the Spanish language, is a nocturnal bird specialized in hunting small mammals like rodents. The hearing of these animals is as sharp as a knife and helps them to locate their food. They are usually of white or light colors, have long legs, and their head is rounded. The birds are monogamous, meaning they will stay with only one partner for their entire life. They breed only once a year, and the longest recorded lifespan of a wild barn owl was of 34 years! (“Animal Diversity Web”).

Barn owls are popular in movies and children’s folk tales. Like the numerous Native American tales that talk about owls in respectful ways. The Hopi tribe held the Burrowing Owl as a sacred individual (“Learn Religion”). Even though in some stories they are portrayed as a symbol of wisdom, in some other tales are seen as hellish creatures. This unpleasant tag has led the barn owl to a path of misfortune in places like Mexico, where they are mistreated, abused, and even killed.

Myths and Legends and How They Affected Barn Owls

Since kindergarten, we learn about fairytales, fables, and stories. Some of them included animals, others included people. Most tales always convey a moral lesson, either about good behavior or what happens when you misbehave. Myths and legends are an important part of the Mexican culture, they have shaped the identity of the culture by preserving traditions and costumes. Unfortunately, a lot of these popular myths have brought persecution and killing of

innocent animals, like hummingbirds and their usage in witchcraft love spells. Just as hummingbirds or even black cats, barn owls are also on the blacklist of witchcraft and mysticism.

In Mexico, there is plenty of folk tales talking about how barn owls are witches in disguise. According to the analysis made by Manuel Charro, the Aztecs considered the barn owl a demonic creature of bad luck and associated it with death and destruction (“Buhos y Lechuzas”). Consequently, this ancient belief has stayed alive among people, therefore shaping a negative perception of barn owls in Mexico. Mexico is an extremely religious country having Catholicism as the primary religion and concern. Even though witchcraft and practices related to it are abundant as well, people have a strong fear and dislike for everything linked to witches. Especially the *Nahuales* (witches that turn into animals) which are other mystical creatures whose legend survived in popular culture (“Cultura Colectiva”). In some villages in the Valley of Mexico, like Yucatan, it is believed that barn owls (or Xoo’ch in the Mayan language) are female witches who at night transform into birds and hunt babies or small children to drink their blood (“Cultura Colectiva”). Although this myth has deep significance in culture because it helps to raise awareness of taking care of babies and kids, it negatively affects barn owls.

Moreover, barn owls have been negatively discriminated against for their peculiar hooting, people find this sound to be eerie and demonic. People believe that the hooting of barn owls announces death in the family or the upcoming death of anybody that hears its cursing chant (“Lechuzas y Buhos”). Among Nahuas (a group of Indigenous people in Mexico), believed that barn owls were birds of bad luck. When they hear the barn owl hooting, specifically if the bird did it three times and scratched the dirt, it signified that someone would die. To escape this fate, men shout obscenities at the animal or even wounded it so the curse would be “canceled” (“Lechuzas

y Buhos”). This ancient belief has raised panic in people throughout centuries leading them to kill or harm the animals merely in “self-protection.”

Witch Hunting, Barn Owls, and Coronavirus

Since all these beliefs have made their way alive to our century, barn owls continue to be the center of discrimination and panic among communities, especially conservative ones. In May 2020, a barn owl was brutally attacked and sprayed with holy water in Yucatan, Mexico because the bird announces and brought death (“El Tiempo”). The bird ended up with severe injuries and a broken peak and wing. The Proyecto Santa Maria (Project Santa Maria), a non-profit animal protection organization, solicited help from the community to proceed with the medical rehabilitation of the animal. Even though the foundation rescued the animal and try to save its life, the owl, unfortunately, passed away due to a lack of medical devices and money for the surgeries it needed (“Proyecto Santa Maria”).

Another case was on the same month in the same year. A disoriented barn owl was found on a baseball field, as soon as the veterinaries reached the place the bird died due to its injuries caused by a previous attack it suffered (“Proyecto Santa Maria”). Investigators declared that barn owls are in the risk category, meaning to be endangered throughout all of Mexico. Vanesa Martinez, director of Proyecto Santa Maria, stated that they had more than sixty reports of birds being attacked by people, especially barn owls because of the superstition surrounding them (“Noticieros Televisa”). Covid-19 created anxiety surrounding the topic of death and sickness. Subsequently, it raised the old and harmful irrational belief of the owls’ hooting, the so-called “chant of death.” Then, during the critical point of the Covid-19 pandemic, people started to attack more barn owls because they fear the superstition these birds have attached (“Proyecto Santa Maria”).

Why Are Barn Owls Important?

Even though owls, especially barn owls, have been attached a negative meaning, these birds are beneficial for the farming and general ecosystem. Since the diet of barn owls consist of small mammals and they have great abilities in hunting them, they help to limit the rodent pest population (“Animal Diversity”). In 2011, a vineyard in California was infested with pock gophers and voles, causing severe damage to the field. So, the farmers initiated the Barn Owl/ Rodent Project, the project consisted in placing a huge population of these birds so they can overrun the existing pest. The farm granted the owls their own little houses while constantly monitoring them and taking care of the birds throughout all the projects (“Owl Pages”).

Also, barn owls help to maintain a balance in the environment. They control the population of small mammals and even birds, but they also provide food to other species that haunt them. They are important in nature and keep the ecosystem functioning efficiently. In general, owls help to preserve climate stability, food production, less pollution, and soil protection (“Woodsy Wisdom”). These reasons are why it is important to raise awareness and consciousness of their protection. In brief, barn owls like any other animal, have their own purpose and importance in the wildlife.

How to Protect Barn Owls

Since barn owls are surrounded by superstition, it might be extremely difficult to change people’s points of view on these birds. And it might be even harder because myths and legends have deep roots in our culture. But we can still raise awareness to help barn owls. For example, we can share information on why it is important to protect owls and barn owls with our friends and ask them to share it with their families. Their parents believe something negative about barn owls and this can change their minds. Also, it is important to share clear information that can help

to understand the importance of the birds. It is worthless to add a lot of technical information if people do not understand it.

Then, we can search for organizations that help to preserve birds. Proyecto Santa Maria is a Mexican organization that specialized in the protection of birds and shares plenty of information about them. Proyecto Santa Maria also offers phone numbers so people can report the mistreatment of any bird. American Bird Conservancy is another notable example of an organization focused on protecting birds (“American Bird Conservancy”). We can either directly support these types of organizations with money, or we can share them with people who can afford to do it. Social media can help us to do these things more easily than before. We can share information about why barn owls need to be protected in Mexico. Consequently, I will upload this essay to my social media and share it with my family so they can learn and be aware of this issue. I will try to support and create an organization that helps to protect *lechuzas* (barn owls). It is the work of everyone to help to preserve wild animals that are in danger. The barn owls need our help so they can have a safer environment and less superstition surrounding them.

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