

CONNECTIONS | MAGAZINE

You need something in common to bond with strangers. For us, it was owls.

What I learned about owls while waiting in line at King Arthur Baking Company.

By **Betsy Vereckey** Updated March 14, 2025, 11:26 a.m.



The writer enjoys volunteering at a bird sanctuary, as well as scouting her Vermont neighborhood for owls. BETSY VERECKY

I'm waiting for my breakfast order by the napkin counter at the King Arthur Baking

Company when a demure woman with gorgeous silver hair approaches me. “Do you like owls?” she asks, eyeing my sweat shirt.

It’s one of my favorites. I wear it so often on cold Vermont mornings that the cuffs have started to fray. It’s gray and has a white silhouette of an owl on it, wings outstretched.

I don’t usually engage in a casual chat with a stranger, especially at this bakery café, where I come with my laptop to work amid the cozy aroma of brioche in the oven. It also seems no good can come from a conversation these days, when every news headline has me binging on chocolate croissants and pistachio chocolate-chip cookies. But I *love* owls.

“I volunteer at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science every week,” I explain.

“Oh, we love it there!” the woman says. “What do you do?”

I never know how to answer this question. How to explain the gross details of cleaning up after birds of prey? I arrive at dawn, early enough that the exhibit owls are still hooting. My fitness tracker estimates that I burn a thousand calories each shift, scrubbing bird poop off rocks, tossing around heavy hoses, and raking up dead animal scraps. The trade-off is quiet time with some of nature’s most majestic creatures — getting to see them stretch out their wings in the sunlight, each feather dangling down like socks on a clothesline.

[Fairlee, Chittenden, Sullivan](#), and the rest of the exhibit birds are there because they’ve been hit by cars or fallen out of trees and are unable to survive in the wild. They’re all named for the places where they sustained their injuries.

My body aches when I'm done with each shift. I look like a zebra, my black jacket splattered in streaks of bird poop. And yet somehow when I arrive back home, I feel far less depressed about the state of the world than when my alarm went off that morning.

"I work with the exhibit birds," I say. "I pick up all the food scraps and clean the room before they open in the morning. Kind of like how real estate agents stage homes."

Betsy Vereckey with the barred owl named Hyde Park at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science. PHOTO FROM BETSY VERECKEY

No need to tell this sweet lady that I pick up rat tails, mouse heads, and other uneaten bits. I'm used to it now, though when I first started my shift, I wasn't able to eat ketchup for a while.

"We have a barred owl who lives in our backyard," she says.

"So do we!"

Scouting the neighborhood for owls is one of my favorite things to do. I keep a pair of binoculars on my desk so I can spot them eyeing our bird feeder from across the lawn. It feels like perfect timing to see one perched in a white pine tree.

The woman sips her coffee, then waves to her husband to call him over. "We bring ours roadkill."

Excuse me? Did I hear that right? This woman brings her owl fresh roadkill? Even I don't do that!

"Whenever we see a dead animal on the road, we stop and pick it up, then drive home

and leave it out for her,” she says.

That’s next-level dedication. Should I be doing that for my owl, too?

Our coffees arrive and we part ways. Though our meet-cute was brief, it lifted my spirits for the rest of the day. Someone else out there loved birds as much as I did. It reminded me of the serendipitous feeling that comes with spotting an owl in the wild, of the joy that comes with being at the right place at the right time.

Maybe it was possible for one sentence to spark a meaningful connection. Maybe I just needed to ease up on my introverted ways. And maybe it was time for me to start traveling with a shovel.

Betsy Vereckey is a writer living in Vermont. Send comments to magazine@globe.com. TELL YOUR STORY. Email your 650-word unpublished essay on a relationship to connections@globe.com. Please note: We do not respond to submissions we won’t pursue.

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