

WESTERN Tanager

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A Splendidly Spooky Avian Encounter

by Robbie Lisa Freeman

Recently, at my home in Mar Vista, I began noticing some unusual sounds. As dusk fell and darkness drew its blanket across the sky, I'd hear intermittent hissing, cries, and croaking sounds. At times, the eerie sounds would increase with such intensity that I'd walk outside to listen. It seemed to be coming from the unlit alley behind our house. Was it some kind of cicada? A rare type of tree frog? Frightful spirits rising up from the dead for Halloween? One night around 11 PM, I heard a bloodcurdling shriek and felt a chill go down my spine! What was going on in Mar Vista?

I began asking neighbors, who all admitted to hearing eerie cries and croaks of unknown origin. Finally, I ran into a man who had answers. "It's a Barn Owl with babies," he said nonchalantly. "We heard them often where I grew up in Mexico." He pointed out a tall palm tree on the street behind my house. "There are babies in the top of that tree."

At first, I was skeptical. In my 30 years in Mar Vista, I had only once seen an owl in the area. Although California Audubon lists Barn Owls as "common" throughout the state, when I searched eBird for Barn Owl reports in Los Angeles, a map overlay showed the "frequency of sightings" as 0%-2% over the last 10 years.

Determined to solve the mystery, the next day I was up before dawn, standing near the foot of the palm tree, peering up into the dark fronds through binoculars. And there she was -- the most angelic-looking Barn Owl to ever haunt Mar Vista. She stared down at me from her high perch on the edge of a pruned palm frond. Her white, heart-shaped face fairly gleamed against the dark fronds. As morning broke and I was finally getting a good glimpse of her spotted white breast, tawny brown feathers, and coal black eyes, she began clambering higher into the palm ... then she vanished like a ghost.



Female Barn Owls can be identified by the speckling on the breast. Add to that the iridescent-looking spots on her wings and she almost looks as if she just was showered with confetti. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.

Anxious to see owlets, I returned at dusk with two other birders to observe and shoot more photos. Neighbors walking by stopped to ask questions and began to hang around. Other neighbors came out into their front yards and set up chairs and brought snacks. Before I knew it, an animated, impromptu owl party had "irrupted", with everyone exchanging stories about the spooky shrieks that had haunted their evenings and their various sightings of the two owlets.

Over the next few days, I witnessed a veritable *abbondanza* of owls: two owlets begging in the treetop and practicing short flights, and two adults on the hunt in the dead of night. What had started as a spooky mystery ended as a joyful discovery for me and our Mar Vista neighbors.



Barn Owls are 12 to 16 inches in length and typically weigh between one and 1.5 pounds, with a wingspan of 3 to 5 feet. They can lift prey up to about 5 pounds. The white beneath the wings adds to their appearance as a ghostly apparition flying through the night skies. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.

Though her head tilt makes her seem curious about us, more than likely she's just trying to get a better look. Owls have fixed eye sockets, so they must move their heads to see their surroundings. Owls can turn their necks 135 degrees in either direction, for a 270-degree total range of vision. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.

Not only do we get to see these regal spirits soaring through the skies but we get to reap other benefits. Barn owls raising a brood have been reported to catch up to 70 pounds of rodents during the breeding and feeding season. Talk about an abbondanza!

Through the weeks, we've all adjusted to the nightly backdrop of shrieking and hissing sounds that are eerily perfect for the Halloween season. In fact, I fear we'll miss these creature calls once the owlets fledge and are dispersed from their nests. Typically, owlets will begin to venture off at around 12 weeks, testing their hunting skills, and by 14 weeks, will have left the nest to find their own territories. Luckily, breeding pairs are known to return to their nest cavities year after year, which means we may be welcoming these mystical creatures back to Mar Vista next year for more "Owloween" adventures. Fingers crossed!



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Rather than flying up into the crown of the palm tree, the owl actually scampered up the side of the tree to disappear into the fronds. | Photo courtesy of Randy Freeman.