

# On Earth Day, the future and a barred owl

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Next Wednesday is the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. In honor of that event, I'd like to share my most memorable birding experience and explain why it especially matters now.

I know the exact day, hour and minute it happened because I captured it on a digital camera. Everything transpired on Sept. 25, 2014, at 6:13 p.m. not far from where I live, in a place that will now never be the same.

It began with a phone call. My old friend Stiles, who lived nearby, said he had just heard a barred owl calling near his back porch. Could I come over, and bring my camera?

A chance to see a barred owl, which has been on New Jersey's threatened and endangered species list since 1979? I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

As soon as I arrived, we walked softly around the large backyard in search of the owl. A big, brownish nocturnal bird with inscrutable coal-black eyes, you'd



**Jim Wright took this photo of a barred owl in the backyard of a friend's place in 2014.** COURTESY OF JIM WRIGHT

think we would have no trouble finding it — but you'd be wrong.

With nightfall descending, we inched through the trees behind the house and scanned the limbs of every conifer. That's where the owl was most likely to perch.

Nothing.

After 10 minutes of futility, Stiles thought we should call it quits.

I suggested that before we gave up, Stiles should try his barred owl call — "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?" — in his throaty, owl-like imitation.

Stiles demurred. "I'm too old for that to work anymore."

I cajoled and insisted.

Finally, Stiles muttered, "alright, alright," and did his barred owl imitation.

Then we waited.

Not a peep.

"See, I told you," Stiles said finally.

At that moment, I happened to look up. And what did I see but a barred owl, perched on a tree limb and staring down at us with those soulful eyes.

We both gasped. I slowly raised my camera and took a photo in the fading light. Then Stiles and I retreated to his back porch.

When our hearts stopped racing, we couldn't stop talking about what we had just witnessed.

Stiles soon put the whole encounter in perspective.

"You know, back in the 1950s or so, we had a field back there," he said. "Then one day I thought, 'I bet if I grow a pine grove instead, someday I'll get a barred owl.'"

That experience, and that comment, have stuck with me ever since. It underscored what I have believed for a long while.

Our planet is constantly changing. Time marches forward, often in heavy boots.

Stiles and his wife Lillian have moved to another place. The pine grove stands, but their home has been replaced by a modern one. Life goes on.

But it makes me wonder. When it comes to protecting birds — nay, to protecting our entire planet — on this 50th anniversary of Earth Day, how far-sighted will our vision be?

When we pull out of this COVID-19 nosedive, will we look for quick economic fixes at the expense of our air, land and water? Or will we look for ways to protect the environment so that it will thrive decades from now, for our grandchildren's children?

In honor of Earth Day next week, please share your most memorable birding moment. Email me at [celeryfarm@gmail.com](mailto:celeryfarm@gmail.com), and please include your name and hometown. Photos most welcome.

*The Bird-watcher column appears every other Thursday. Email Jim at [celeryfarm@gmail.com](mailto:celeryfarm@gmail.com).*