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New York

Freedom has been a hoot, but can Flaco the owl survive New York City?

Aliya Uteuova in New York

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There were fears Flaco would not survive outside captivity, but the owl has defied the odds for nine months. Photograph: Courtesy Ron Lugo

The Eurasian eagle owl has been living in Central Park since escaping the zoo, and just returned from a Lower East Side visit

“Is he back?” Russell Davis exclaimed, as he spotted a group of people looking up at a tree during his afternoon bike ride. Davis stopped in his tracks, dismounted and joined the onlookers admiring a statuesque owl with piercing orange eyes and unmistakable ear tufts. New York’s Central Park has experienced a homecoming of sorts, perhaps even a minor Thanksgiving miracle - the return of the beloved celebrity bird known as Flaco.

Since February, the Eurasian eagle owl had been living wild after fleeing the Central Park zoo, where he had been an exhibit for 13 years, after his enclosure was vandalized.

The raptor became a fixture of the park, with a growing fanbase huddled around the oak tree it often perched on, after he evaded early attempts at recapture, was then left alone by the zoo and learned to hunt for himself.



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Large owls - and a Eurasian eagle owl is the world’s second largest - can forage up to 10 miles. But beyond brief ventures in the neighborhood, Flaco had made Central Park his home for the past nine months, until two weeks ago when he suddenly left.

“There is consensus that the marathon might have chased it off,” said Ron Lugo, an avid birdwatcher who has been following Flaco’s tracks since his famous escape, referring to the November race that brought 50,000 runners, crowds and fireworks to the park. Then Flaco was spotted in the Lower East Side neighborhood, atop an air conditioning unit, more than six miles downtown.

Another theory is that Flaco, who had been significantly more vocal with his hooting that week, explored the new frontier in search of love, much like other owls this time of year.

“Obviously another Eurasian eagle owl is not around but there are great horned owls in the vicinity,” said Kevin McGowan, an ornithologist at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

There was concern, much discussed on social media, that Flaco would be in increased danger in the new, unfamiliar neighborhood. But just a few days after his trip downtown he was safely back in Central Park.

There is ongoing speculation that Flaco, the only owl of its kind in the wild in North America, could mate with another owl of a different species. And a great horned owl, nicknamed Geraldine, has been residing in the park for over two years, giving a glimmer of hope that the two could mate.

“It is certainly conceivable that Flaco could get lucky and find an unpaired great horned owl, but I probably wouldn’t bet on it,” McGowan said.

A crowd of people gather to look at Flaco after his escape in Central Park in New York, 6 February 2023. Photograph: Seth Wenig/AP

However, a failed chance at love isn’t the only potential fate that Flaco faces trying to live on his wits in the Big Apple. Like other birds of prey in the city, he risks ingesting poisoned rats or being hit by a car while catching his prey. A wild barred owl nicknamed Barry that lived in Central Park was killed when she was struck by a park maintenance vehicle driving at night in 2021. She was then found to have already been riddled with rat poison.

So far, Flaco is safe.

“Of course we were worrying about the rodenticide, and everybody is just delighted and relieved that it didn’t get poisoned outside,” Lugo said.

In his very first days as a free bird, having been rescued by the zoo in 2010 at less than a year old, there was concern that the 13-year-old owl wouldn’t survive outside captivity. Despite the odds, he gradually showed the world he could catch rats in the park and his flying became stronger, eventually prompting the zoo to abandon its efforts at recapture.

Back in Central Park earlier this month, Flaco placidly took in the sunny afternoon, yawning, stretching and preening his feathers, unbothered by the growing crowd of spectators.

“Look at those feet, oh my god they’re huge!” Davis, the cyclist, exclaimed, glued to every move Flaco made. “I think it’s cool that he got free from the zoo and apparently he is thriving.”

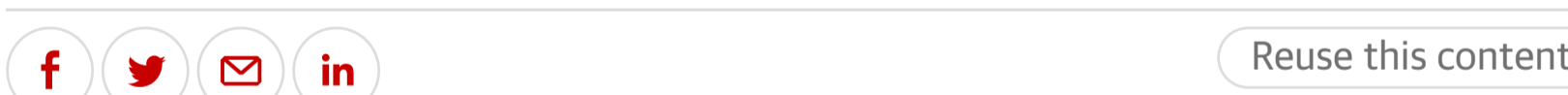
But soon after, a crow flew over and landed next to Flaco, then a mob of six crows hovered around him, cawing, seemingly trying to scare the raptor out of what they regarded as their territory.

“Not a nice welcome home, Flaco,” someone commented from the crowd. Meanwhile the owl, which boasts a 6ft wingspan, didn’t seem disturbed, rather, merely annoyed by the winged visitors, who then went on their way. One birdwatcher recalled hearing that a red-tailed hawk had earlier chased Flaco off.

“That would be a real good cage match right there, eagle owl versus red-tailed hawk,” said McGowan. “I don’t know which one I would pick. Both of them are formidable, and both of them deserve respect from the other.”

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