

Carl Safina and Alfie: after being hand-reared, Alfie had no fear of her human companions, allowing them to

Most days, I'd get up before dawn and watch owl doings for two or three

owl life. I could walk around, follow, sit in the open - she didn't care. The

Male suitors impress by "courtship feeding". He'd take a few minutes to

catch something, usually a moth, while she waited on a branch by the nest

But Alfie was tentative at first, refusing most of his gifts, or taking them half-

heartedly. Eventually, she got comfortable, anticipating his arrival. Soon

enough, I was elated to discover that Alfie was incubating three eggs.

wild male in her life was the one who had her attention.

box I'd placed on the outside wall of my writing studio.

hours, and do the same around sunset. Alfie gave me an unmatched view of

experience owl life up close

After some time living outside, Alfie acquired a romantic interest – and produced her first clutch of eggs

I was seeing the nuance of a bonding process. First, I'd cared about her

physical disability. Now I was seeing her emotional capability. But why did

this surprise me? Why are we usually blind to the living world that made us

In many belief systems the most holy and important things are of this world;

through the Industrial Revolution into the modern global economic system.

in the western dualist perspective the world is often regarded as the least

holy, least important thing. This devaluation of the world has seeped

possible? Watching Alfie was blurring the usual boundaries that western

philosophy had erected between humans and nature.

Watching

Alfie was

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humans and

All human-created systems deliver on the values that prompted them. The

systems that support modern life depend on creating damage to the living

Mass extinctions, climate breakdown, toxins and pollution; these are now

sometimes referred to collectively as "the multi-crisis". After summers of

blanketing smoke from thousands of devastating wildfires on various

Even after her release, Alfie remained close to home, and continued to spend time with her human rescuers

Preventing the living world's destruction - and our own - would entail a

route to stabilise Earth's climate system.

One of Alfie's chicks climbs a tree outside the Safina home

live in relationship is how we might heal.

Wildlife

by W.W. Norton

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The age of extinction

willingness to value other-than-human life. Human dignity will depend on

that re-valuation. Trees, not tech, constitute the fastest and least expensive

Alfie became the owl she was born to be when she left our protection for the

risks and rewards of free agency. She is who she is by the chance happenings

of her life and by learning to exploit the details of her local landscape while

avoiding the loose cats, hawks and other hazards. She and her mate raised

gone unbroken - so far - for many millions of owl generations.

three young ones that first year, forging new links in the great chain that has

continents, have we done anything to change our tune?

Alfie's three owlets -

pictured in the first image at just 17 days old - grew up healthy

world.

Alfie lives in relationship, and our surprising capacity to relate to one another

expanded my perspective on her life and mine. Birds and humans have not

had a common ancestor for 300m years. Yet, Alfie always enjoyed a little

allowing us to share such pleasures. People for many thousands of years

lived in relationship with nature and with their communities. If there is one

lesson from traditional and Indigenous cultures - and from Alfie - it is that to

Now five years old, Alfie has brought 10 young owls into the world so far. She

Owls Know, What Humans Believe - partially excerpted here, is published

Birds

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is fully herself in the world - a task that remains a work in progress for me.

Carl Safina is an ecologist and writer. His new book - Alfie & Me: What

Animals

head scratch that we enjoyed giving. Our nervous systems still relate,

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