One year ago, someone set him free.

"Tide doing things he never did before," said Richard Pruim, a bird expert at Tide.

The Year Flaco the Owl Roamed Free

He fled the Central Park Zoo and made the rest of Manhattan his own home. What has he been up to?

By Sebastian Modak
Feb. 12, 2024

It started with a bonsai act in the heart of Manhattan.

After dusk on a frosty evening at the Central Park Zoo, someone shredded the mesh on an enclosure that was home to a Eurasian eagle-owl named Flaco.

Before long, Flaco was spotted a few blocks away on Fifth Avenue. Nobody knew where this bird with fiery orange eyes had come from, and soon he was off to a tree by the Pulitzer Fountain, outside the Plaza Hotel. A tourist with wings.

Could he survive in the wilderness, a reporter — Flaco was free, after all, from the Manhattan Bird Alert mailing list — asked?

A year later, the answer is definitely yes. He has spent most of his time in Central Park, though he has wandered all over Manhattan, peering into apartment windows with his striking eyes.

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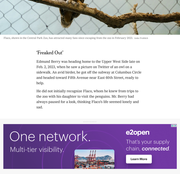
Flaco has captured the public's attention in New York and beyond, inspiring poems, songs and a documentary. Photographers and fans track him in person or follow his exploits online. But how has he experienced New York? What does the city look, feel and sound like from his bird's-eye view?



Flaco, dwelling in the Central Park Zoo, has attracted many fans since escaping from the zoo in February 2023. Jose Franco

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'Freaked Out'

Edmund Berry was heading home to the Upper West Side late on Feb. 2, 2023, when he saw a picture on Twitter of an owl on a sidewalk. An avid birder, he got off the subway at Columbus Circle and headed toward Fifth Avenue near East 60th Street, ready to see a bird.

He did not initially recognize Flaco, whom he knew from trips to the zoo with his daughter to visit the penguins. Mr. Berry had always paused for a look, thinking Flaco's life seemed lonely and sad.

On this night, he saw Flaco hunkered in flashing red lights next to a small pet carrier as police officers loaded on. When they dropped a larger carrier nearby, Flaco spread his wings and flew off toward the Plaza.

Jeremy Berry

He hatched in captivity at a North Carolina bird park on March 31, 2018, and soon arrived at the Central Park Zoo. Within a short time, Flaco was "adjusting very well to his new home," the Wildlife Conservation Society said in a tweet. He was, and he seemed happy.

Owls can live for two or more years in the wild, experts say, homes in the scientific name Bubo bubo, are apex predators typically found in much of continental Europe, Scandinavia, Russia and Central Asia. They are among the world's largest owls, with a wingspan of more than six feet. They have adapted to hunting in dense forests, swooping down at night to hunt rodents, rabbits and other prey. But they have also been known to hang out in cities, where terraces, windowsills and rooftops resemble the cliff ledges they are used to.

Now, out on the Manhattan streetscape, Flaco appeared lost. Karin Bloem, the executive director of the International Owl Center in Houston, said he was likely "freaked out" and "disoriented" in pictures from that first night and the following days.

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Over the next couple of weeks, though, he settled into the park and eluded the city's efforts to retrieve him. Mr. Bloem detected a transformation in the pictures.

"His ear tufts are down," she said. "He's puffier. He was certainly getting comfortable with his surroundings."

Flaco, dwelling in the Central Park Zoo, has attracted many fans since escaping from the zoo in February 2023. Jose Franco

"It was as if he realized that his life had changed," said David Barrett, who runs the Manhattan Bird Alert account on X.

"He seems to be thriving," said Kathleen Cornell, New York City's owl czar.

On the Hunt

For a while, one workers tried to have Flaco back using traps baited with dead rats, but he was unimpressed. He learned to hunt his own food instead. He ate at least a pellet of undigested rat fur and bone he coughed up one day.

He was lucky: Central Park was a "target-rich environment," in the words of James Eyring, a falconer and a retired Pace University environmental sciences professor.

"When they see that movement, that herky-jerky movement that rodents have, I mean, that's like passing by the McDonald's arches," Mr. Eyring said.

Flaco became a fixture in and around the North Woods and the Lake, hunting nearby at a compost pile and a construction site where nonstop processes of food hung in a trailer.

Mr. Barrett, who also is a Central Park co-a, a birder and photographer who has followed him closely, said:

"He would sleep at the compost heap, wake up, hop over a few trees to a favorite perch and then hunt for rats." Mr. Lee said.

But around Halloween, Flaco left Central Park. Perhaps it was seasonal wanderlust or part of the biological impulse to breed — an impulse he can't satisfy.

In November, Flaco crash-landed into the windowsill on a Bobby Hackett Pianist's apartment on Grand Street on the Lower East Side. "He was jumping up and down totally spastic," she said. Jose Franco

There are no female Eurasian eagle-owls in New York, and so for Flaco, no potential mates. Some people have suggested a possible match with Geraldine, a female great horned owl, a related species, who had established residence in the park by the time Flaco showed up. Not impossible, experts said, but not desirable, and she has not been seen in the park for a while.

The Romeo and Juliet of Birds

The sex therapist Dr. Ruth Westheimer, who was recently appointed as New York's boulevard ambassador, learned Flaco's story from a friend who had been following it closely. Dr. Ruth was an owl, "though he's not gray-gray. Flying all over New York to find companionship."

He has been heard hooting from rooftops and water towers across the Upper West Side, sometimes calling out into the post-midnight silence. Does he miss companionship? Loneliness? and possibly was a mate. Maybe he would settle for a friend.

"I admire Flaco because he had a big dream, he believed in himself and he followed his heart," Dr. Ruth's longtime Manhattanite, said in an email. "Flaco, if you ever read this, I hope you'll fly on over to Sesame Street for a visit. My nest is your nest!"

Flaco, the Owl, Was Seen Near the Apartment Building Where Prosecutor Alvin L. Bragg Lives

"Fish Tony Soprano, the king of his environment," said James Ewing, a falconer.

"Flaco is free, like all birds should be," said Philippe Petit, a high-wire artist.

Making His Way Downtown

Eurasian eagle-owls are not migratory birds, but they can cover a good distance, usually in a series of short flights. And for a species that soars to 10,000 feet, life amid the Manhattan skyline would hardly be daunting.

In exploring the city from on high, Flaco has plenty of company and plenty to see. Charles Semowich, who plays the carillon inside the 392-foot tower at Riverside Church, said he hears occasional screeching outside his window. Apparently, an eagle lives in the tower somewhere.

Jason Chadee and Conrad Lazare, union ironworkers with Locals 40 and 361, have encountered falcons and hawks as they've shaped the city's skyline. Mr. Chadee said it was peaceful and beautiful up high with just the city lights, the wind and his thoughts. Mr. Lazare called it a "safe space" away from everything below.

The streets pose an acute threat for Flaco, with all of the cars and trucks. Gladys, a female Eurasian eagle-owl who escaped from a Minnesota zoo in 2022, died a few weeks later after she was apparently hit by a vehicle.

On Nov. 14, Flaco found a safe space outside Nan Knighton's apartment on Fifth Avenue, planting himself on a windowsill and peering inside.

Flaco at the Fifth Avenue apartment of Nan Knighton in November. Nan Knighton

Ms. Knighton was enthralled; she had not heard about Flaco. Worried that he might be in distress, she called around unsuccessfully to see whether someone might come to take him.

"I think he's at a point now where the city is his domain," she said. "And he feels confident, and he's curious, and he's enjoying himself."

Marjon Savelsberg, a Dutch owl researcher, said the wild Eurasian eagle-owls she studies would not behave the same way. "They stay away from humans as much as possible," she said.

There were exceptions, she noted, including extreme cases involving males who have been raised domestically and identify more closely with humans than with owls. If released, they may try to mate with people.

"They land on people's heads," Ms. Savelsberg said. "Doesn't happen often. We had one case a few years ago."

David Lei and Jacqueline Emery, a photographer couple, follow a "best rivets" — an unofficial map of places of where Flaco has been heard — to hang tabs on the owl. Here he is at 20 Central Park West. Jacqueline Emery

'Just a Matter of Time'

Since November, Flaco has been mostly out of the park and the public eye, roaming from the West 70s to the West 90s, from Central Park West to West End Avenue. Birders like David Barrett, who runs the Manhattan Bird Alert account on the social media site X, have monitored his every move.

During daylight, Flaco camps out in apartment building courtyards, sleeping in seclusion where he is warmer and out of the wind. An impressive an his survival has been, his future is not guaranteed. Rat poison is probably the biggest threat as he roams. Because of poison restrictions in the park, he is safest eating there.

"I frankly find the whole situation unfortunate," said Scott Weidensaul, the author of the Peterson Reference Guide to Owls, adding, "It's really just a matter of time before something bad happens."

D. Bruce Yolton agrees, although he would be happy to be proved wrong.

Mr. Yolton, a birder and a blogger, has followed Flaco since he saw him the night he got out. He believes Flaco has not been served well by many people, including those who make light of his release or ignore the danger he faces.

Eurasian eagle-owls live about 20 years in the wild on average. Their life span in captivity can be double that or more. Mr. Yolton would prefer that Flaco retire to a spacious sanctuary.

Wherever set him loose in the first place remains at large, too. The investigation is continuing, the police said.

Flaco's former enclosure was empty this week. There are no plans to reuse it. He is no longer listed among the zoo's animals, although an image of an owl indicating where Flaco once lived is still on a map outside the zoo.

The conservation society said in a statement that it had been monitoring Flaco and appreciated the public's concern for his well-being. "As noted previously, we are prepared to resume recovery efforts if he shows any sign of difficulty or distress," the statement said.

Mary Aaron thought she might have seen a sign of distress around midnight on Jan. 31. She was at home in her 20th-floor apartment on Central Park West near 87th Street when she heard hooting coming from her balcony.

She called the police at the 24th Precinct and said she thought an owl might need help.

"Is that that famous big owl that's flying around?" an officer said.

Two officers arrived a short time later and shooed the owl away by shining a flashlight in its eyes, Ms. Aaron said.

The police confirmed that officers had responded to a call about an owl at Ms. Aaron's address. They could not say whether it was Flaco. (Owls do not carry ID.)

There was one telling detail: The owl in question "had a large wingspan."

Ed Shanahan is a reverie reporter and editor covering breaking news and general assignments on the Metro desk. More about Ed Shanahan.

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 4, 2023, Section MB, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Fans of Flaco, Now a Wanted Fugitive. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

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