

'Barn owls know no boundaries': How Arab and Israeli conservationists transcend the division of war

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Highlight: Scientists from across the Middle East are working together to save an unlikely symbol of hope: the barn owl.

Body

While division persists in the Middle East, wildlife experts refuse to be kept apart.

They are united in saving an important predator: the barn owl.

The moon-faced, shoebox-sized owl is a ruthless pest controller that helps farmers by protecting crops from rodents and other nuisances.

"A pair of barn owls eats between 2,000 and 6,000 rodents every year, allowing farmers to stop using pesticides," says Yossi Leshem, professor emeritus at Tel Aviv University's School of Zoology.

Conservationists from across the Middle East work together to protect the barn owl by creating artificial nests, typically modified plywood boxes.

Israeli Professor Leshem pioneered the nesting project in the early 1980s on a community farm.

"From 14 nesting boxes in one kibbutz, it grew into a national project with 5,000 boxes in Israel and partnerships in Jordan, Palestine, Cyprus and Morocco," he says.

'Barn owls know no boundaries'

Experts from 12 countries gathered in Greece last week to help this remarkable predator that began decades ago as an unlikely Israeli-Jordanian collaboration.

In 2002, Professor Leshem partnered with retired Gen. Mansour Abu Rashid, to bring the boxes to Jordan.

Abu Rashid helped extend the project to Jordan, using lightweight radio transmitters to monitor the birds.

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"Barn owls know no boundaries; they fly between Jordan, Palestine, and Israel," said Leshem. "They symbolise cooperation."

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Protecting the barn owl despite the war

The Middle East is a critical region for bird conservation of all kinds, sitting at the junction of long-distance migration routes.

Arab and Israeli scientists have kept their collaboration going during periods of tension and war, including the ongoing conflict in Gaza. When necessary, they switch to online meetings and talks at international conferences.

According to conference officials, the main impact of the war on the owl programme is the large amount of land destroyed in Lebanon, burning nesting areas and boxes in areas near the Israeli border.

"We never stop; we just keep going," Leshem says. "That's why this project is successful."

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Why barn owls are seen as symbols of bad luck

Another challenge was overcoming the region's long-standing superstitions about owls.

In the region, the birds are often regarded as harbingers of bad luck. One theory is that they were often attracted to the light from homes during nighttime vigils for the dying.

In Jordan, imams were enlisted in rural areas to counter the superstition, Abu Rashid says.

"We started awareness programs in schools and universities, engaging local communities. We involved women's associations because they influence families and communities," he says. "Children coloured in pictures of barn owls."

How barn owl nesting projects are helping in Europe

Swiss scientist [Alexandre Roulin](#) said that barn owl nesting projects are gaining traction in Europe, helping populations recover after nesting sites in traditional barns and farm attics disappeared.

"This bird is widespread worldwide. The model we've implemented can be replicated in many other countries, including the United States and Asia," says Roulin, a professor at the University of Lausanne.

"It's a nocturnal bird surrounded by mystery and superstition, but it's fascinating," he adds. "They're one of the only nocturnal predators that are white. Why white? Research suggests their white feathers reflect moonlight, creating a ghostly appearance that startles prey."

Barn owls also have near surround vision, swiveling their heads up to 270 degrees, far beyond a human's 170 degrees. Their eerie screeches, unlike the gentler hoots of other owls, adds to their reputation as formidable predators.

'Incredibly moving'

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Vasileios Bontzorlos, who headed the Greek environmental group TYTO and hosted the conference, said that interest is growing across countries.

"Agriculture officials are becoming more open to natural solutions. That's a huge milestone for us," Bontzorlos says.

"Years ago, I visited Israel, Jordan, and Palestine and sat at the same table with people from all three nationalities," he says. "Hosting these discussions in Greece gives me hope. At a time when we often only hear bad news, this shows that collaboration is possible, even in difficult circumstances. It's incredibly moving."

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