

# 'Tuck in ponytails' to avoid dangerous owl encounters

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Owl spotting is on the rise this year in Greater Victoria, judging by the online posts, word of mouth and backed by numbers recorded through the Rocky Point Bird Observatory (RPBO).

The Victoria-based registered charity focuses on influencing ecological management practices and conservation of migratory birds in western North America with monitoring, scientific research and public education.

"The barred owls are the ones people are talking about a lot now," said board member Ann Nightingale. "We get a lot of stories every year, it does seem to be a higher number this year than usual."

RPBO is currently seeking funding to do a tracking project on barred owls to answer some of the questions about numbers, territorial range and other behaviours. In the absence of that kind of official data, the appearance of abundance could be attributed to a combination of more owls in general in higher visibility areas and the social media effect.

Rocky Point Bird Observatory does band and collect data on northern saw-whet owls – and has since 2002. This year saw a jump in that



**While unlikely, a great horned owl could carry off a big rabbit or a small cat, but could do serious damage in a failed attempt. (Photo by Ann Nightingale)**

population – the second highest total ever with more than 1,400 in six weeks, Nightingale said.

"We have noticed a strong correlation between a strong northern saw-whet owl season and a higher number of barred owls, and this year was the same," she told Black Press Media.

Few are lucky enough to see the northern

saw-whet because they're small and rarely come out in the day.

Those barred owls, however, are large, easy to see even without binoculars and they will hang out anywhere – from a forested park area outside of town to the Central Branch of the Greater Victoria Public Library – day or night.

"They're basically in every small park and neighbourhood in Victoria. We don't have a real good estimate on how many there are," Nightingale said. "They'll hunt day and night, they're very vocal (and) everyone knows the 'who cooks for you' call."

With that kind of visibility, once one is posted on social media, others will spot it or even seek it out.

Which is fine, as long as folks heed any warnings also issued.

"They aren't random. These birds are in a particular area," Nightingale said.

"If there's an owl at the Saanich Peninsula Hospital that roosts in a tree and has been known to come down and hit people in the head, I would avoid it."

This fall, public reports of an aggressive owl prompted Sidney to warn Reay Creek Park trail users to be wary and Nightingale has a few tips for that too.

"Tuck in ponytails and hide pompoms," she said.

Those cute tassels atop toques and the bobbing ponytail of a jogger look an awful lot like a squirrel tail, particularly younger learning owls.

Wear a hat in a known owl corridor and put something that looks like eyes on the back of the hat or hood. It mimics something that happens in nature, for example, both the northern Pygmy and northern saw-whet owls can have markings that look like eyes.

"The reason this might help is because most predators like to come in undetected," Nightingale said. "If the owl thinks you're looking at it because you have googly eyes on the back of your hat it's going to be less likely to come at you."

While there are tales of large owls carrying off the occasional pets, a barred owl – generally weighing in at fewer than two pounds – can take a small rabbit or a squirrel, and the larger great-horned owl could take a big rabbit or a small cat, Nightingale said. However, if an owl misjudges size or capabilities it could injure or kill a pet.

Do you have a great owl photo or video to share? Send it to us by emailing [christine.van-reeuwijk@blackpress.ca](mailto:christine.van-reeuwijk@blackpress.ca).

## Sidney firefighters sweat out the poisons after battling toxic blazes

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Knowing occupational cancer is the primary cause of firefighter fatalities, Sidney Fire Chief Brett Mikkelsen sought some specific requirements when the community safety building was being designed.

He took the time to travel and gather information on his part, to have a building designed to last, with an expedient workflow to get crews to the trucks quickly while maintaining no cross-contamination.

The building that opened in 2019 and houses the fire department, an ambulance station, and Peninsula Emergency Measures Organization and serves as the EOC has all the "dirty areas" such as the turnout gear room and garage on separate airflow from clean areas such as the kitchen, dorm and gym.

At that time, the pair of infrared saunas with exercise bikes inside was

a bit cutting edge, he told the Peninsula News Review.

While they can prevent added exposure in the hall, it proves challenging to avoid coming in contact with cancer-causing toxins in today's fires. Firefighters can be exposed to hundreds of different chemicals known or suspected to cause cancer. B.C. recognizes 18 cancers as occupational diseases for firefighters.

At the Sidney Volunteer Fire Department, decontamination can begin with a hose down on-site of a fire, or the large decon shower in the truck bay – followed by that particular design of the new hall – with a clear path "dirty" to "transitory" to "clean" air.

"Even though you're completely covered your skin and your pores open up and all the fire gases that contain all the broken down products and primarily plastics and fuels, absorb into the bloodstream," he said. "Within 24 hours if you can vigor-



**Sidney firefighter Steve Bibb sweats out toxins in one of two decontamination saunas at Sidney's Community Safety Building building. (Christine van Reeuwijk/News Staff)**

ously perspire or sweat you can excrete a lot of those heavy metals, well poisons for a lack of a better term, out of your bloodstream before they get absorbed into tissues. That's the rationale behind these decon saunas."

There are strict safety protocols.

Crew members are generally left a little dehydrated and tired after fighting a fire and the whole idea is to perform exercise in the heat. So, there's a buddy system and 15-minute maximum.

"At about the six or seven mark

you're dripping in sweat," said Mikkelsen, who is among those using the system. Not that long ago after 20 minutes inside a structure "doing overhaul" in a Central Saanich blaze.

It's not like they're used every day, but remain key pieces of equipment. "After every structure fire where our folks have been in for a considerable amount of time we use them," Mikkelsen said. "I'm glad we're not in fires every day or not exposed to the products of combustion every day."

This summer, the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) celebrated a victory when Canadian parliament enacted legislation establishing a national framework for addressing occupational cancer in firefighters. According to the IAFF, in the past decade, 431 of its Canadian members have died from recognized occupational cancers.

The bill also proclaims January as Firefighter Cancer Awareness Month in Canada.

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