

SOFOnaturalist



Each quarter SOFO features eco-links, written by a member or friend of the Museum. If you wish to submit an article, please contact us.

eco links

Alfie and Me: *What An Owl Helped Me See*

by Carl Safina

The little rescued owl we'd named Alfie had been living a comfortable, healthy life. A developmental setback stemming from her near-fatal infancy had delayed her departure. Now she was perfectly fit, her new feathers soft and sleek and luminous with youth. She was a strong and excellent flier. And she was perfectly at home in her roomy enclosure. But I knew—as she did not—that an owl who is not out doing owly things is just a bird in a cage. Yet could I really subject her to the dangers of freedom? Would “freedom” really mean injury, or starvation, or getting eaten? All this was on my mind that morning as she flew from the coop to me while I was offering her food. But it was she who made the decision. She merely touched my arm and flew across the yard and suddenly was taking in the world from a new vantage point atop a tree. She hadn't vanished. Not yet. She had been braided into our life. But now she was tugging back, pulling us into hers.

One can travel the world and get nowhere. One can be stuck keeping the faith at home and discover a new world. And we were indeed stuck at home. The owl's new free-flying existence corresponded with the Covid shutdowns. But the owl, the songbirds, and our pets gave us a silver lining, a story of profound beauties and magical timing harbored within a year upended. Home is always too close and yet too distant for us to fully know it. It can take a kind of magic spell to let us see the miracles in our everyday routines. Our enabling wizard was the little owl.

That year, we stayed closer but saw farther. The hundred-foot circle around our house contains histories. Something like a trillion and a half times, daylight has rolled across our planet of changes. No two days are the same, regardless of how small and petty and blurry we make them. Written in every rock and leaf and the lyrics of every bird's song are invitations. If we accept and attend, we see that billion-year histories are the thrust that sends each blade of grass, that dreamscapes whirl within each traveling shadow.



Alfie rescued

The backstory on Alfie: The photo in a text message in 2018 looked like a wet washcloth. The text, from a wildlife rehabber friend of mine, explained that it was found on the ground. No nest in sight. I could make out that this was a baby screech owl. But if this owl was still alive, I'd be surprised.

This barely living baby's dirt-matted down was full of fly eggs. But washed, dabbed dry, warmed, and stabilized, the bedraggled chick survived and began to thrive.

Soon she came to us for a soft release. In my twenties I had helped found a wildlife-rehabilitation group, I was currently a university ecologist, and had permits for wildlife rehab, falconry, and bird banding. The plan was: Alfie would fledge and explore at her own pace. Like parent owls we'd back her up; we'd keep her safe and well. When she was ready, she'd wander off naturally.



Alfie with one of her owlets

But, likely because of her near-death infancy, her flight feathers were delayed. I decided to keep her in protective custody until she molted and I could ascertain that her feathers would grow and molt correctly. By the time that happened, winter was coming, so I delayed her release until warm weather returned.

And we got very familiar. I began to realize that our developing relationship with Alfie was not just about us caring for her. She had a wing in our world, and that meant, too, that we had a foot in hers. Something mutual was going on. The intimacy allowed us glimpses of life from Alfie point of view.

My easy intimacy with Alfie made me want to better understand why we usually have a strained relationship with the natural world. We usually live disconnected from the rest of the living world. But Alfie was giving us a strong connection. That made me wonder whether we are taught our usual disconnect. And that made me curious about how various peoples, through time, viewed humankind's place in the world. How have other cultures throughout time and around the globe seen humanity's place in the order of things?



Alfie

This all happened during the Covid shutdowns, giving me plenty of time to get to know her not as “an owl” but as an individual who related in certain ways, who had her own habits and her own sense of well-being. I also had plenty of time to delve

into the origins of our usual disconnect and indeed our alienation from the wild lives around us.

It turns out, for most of human history, Native peoples, more intimate with their existence than we with ours, perceived that Life and the cosmos are mainly relational. Later, Asian traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and others also focused on

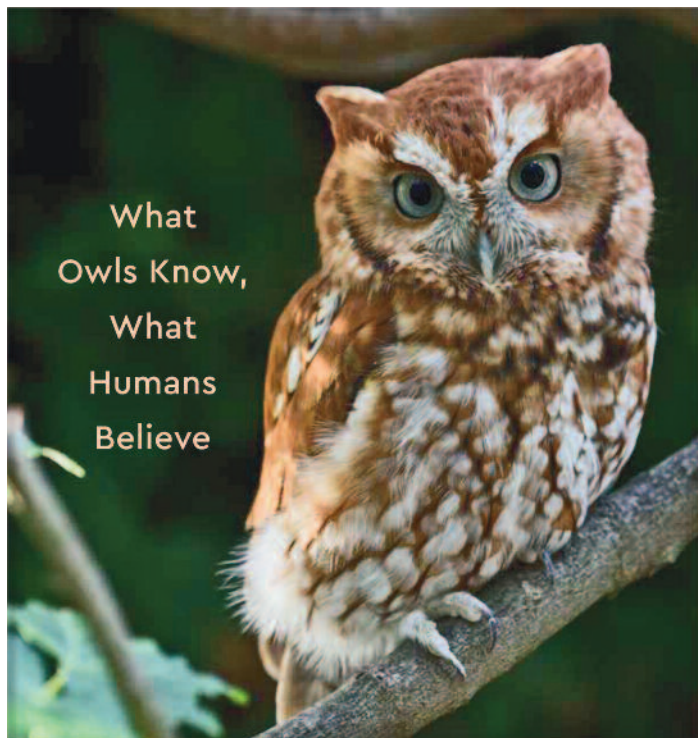
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the human being's participation in material and spiritual harmonies, in maintaining dynamic balances that held the world together.

Then, in ancient Greece, Plato split existence into the ideal and the real. Plato disparaged the flawed material world. His "dualist" view placed perfection outside the world, outside space and time. He said we should focus on reaching that perfect realm, and that this would happen when death released our eternal souls from our decadent bodies. This view, incorporated into Judaism and Christianity, became the bedrock of the Western worldview.

If I may oversimplify: in most ancient and traditional beliefs, the world comprised the most holy and important things; in the European, or "Western," perspective that developed after Plato, the world was the least holy, least important thing. The Western view has globalized, and the global economy reflects this Western devalua-



What
Owls Know,
What
Humans
Believe

Alfie & Me

Carl Safina

Join SOFO and Carl Safina
for a book reading of

Alfie and Me:

What Owls Know and Humans Believe
at SOFO on Saturday, March 23 at 3:00 pm.

The event is free.

To register, please contact the museum at info@sofo.org
or call 631-537-9735.

tion of the world. And here we are. Values that held sway deep in humanity's cultural past are not past; they're very much with us. In many ways and often without knowing why, we are merely playing out roles written for us thousands of years ago.

Alfie, meanwhile, continued to demonstrate how deeply relational all life is. Her history and her relationships made her who she was. Same with us. When we did achieve the long-delayed soft release, Alfie chose to stay around. She soon attracted a wild mate. I was astonished to see that courtship was not just "courtship" but, rather, the development of a relationship of trust and reliance. At first, Alfie did not trust her suitor (whom we named Plus-One). Proximity between them developed slowly; at first she did not accept his offerings of food. Eventually she accepted some, and then began to look forward to his arrival, and then they were emotionally bonded. And then they chose a nest site and very competently raised and fledged a first family of young owlets.

My relationship with Alfie helped me understand what is possible when we soften our borders at the species boundary. Now five years old, Alfie has raised three broods and sent ten young owls out into the world. We often see her in our backyard. This little being able to see into darkness has helped put a little more light into my eyes.

Footnotes on Nature

A Deeper Dive into the World of Seals

by Erin Hwong, SOFO Environmental Educator



Harbor seals on a sand bar in Shinnecock Bay, Erin Hwong, SOFO

During the colder winter months, we often find pinnipeds visiting Long Island from New England and eastern Canada. The term "pinniped" refers to the group of marine mammals that have front and rear flippers, including seals, sea lions, and walrus. The seals native to Long Island are all considered phocid seals ("true seals"), meaning they have no external ear flap. Rather, their ear openings are closed by a small flap of skin when diving underwater. The three most common species of seals found on Long Island are the harbor seal, the gray seal, and the arctic seal. Harbor seals make up about 95% of the seals of Long Island, while gray seals make up 4%, and arctic seals the remaining 1%.

These seals regularly leave the water to "haul out," a behavior during which they socialize and rest. If hauling out undisturbed, seals will sleep with both hemispheres of their brain shut down, just as we do. Seals may also rest in the water by "bottling," where they shut down only one hemisphere of their brain, allowing them to retain some consciousness to avoid drowning. During this behavior, the seals' heads are tilted back while the rest of their body is positioned vertically in the water.

This winter may be particularly notable due to an El Niño event, which occurs every 2-7 years on average. Expected to last through February 2024, this winter's El Niño is predicted to bring warmer-than-average temperatures to the northern United States. El Niño

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A full description of each program is listed on the SOFO website:

www.sofa.org/calendar

January, February, & March

For SOFO members: programs are free, unless otherwise stated.

Level of membership indicates the number of people entitled to a free program.

For SOFO non-members: there is a fee.

Please contact us at: info@sofo.org for fee information or refer to the SOFO website at: www.sofa.org.

If you are not already a member we invite you to join the museum.

Find out about membership levels at www.sofa.org/membership.

For full information on the South Fork Natural History Museum (SOFO), including entrance fees and hours of operation, please refer to the website: www.sofa.org.

**Join SOFO educators for a chance to see Long Island's
seasonal visitors during any of our upcoming seal walks:**

Winter 2024 Seal Viewing with SOFO

Tuesday, January 9, 10:30AM: Seal Walk at Cupsogue County Park: Adults

Sunday, February 25, 1:30PM: Seal Walk at Cupsogue County Park: A/T/C 8+

Saturday, March 9, 11:30AM: Seal Walk at Cupsogue County Park: A/T/C8+

Please contact us at (631) 537-9735 or at info@sofo.org to register for our programs.



Gray Seal © A. H. Kopelman for
CRESLI



Juvenile Harp Seal Riverhead Foundation for Marine
Research



Harbor Seal Ian Robinson SOFO

Calendar At A Glance

Key: A-Adults T-Teens C-Children F-Family AA-All Ages

A full description of each program is listed on the SOFO website at www.sofo.org/calendar.

Advance reservations are required for all programs.

January

- Saturday, January 6, 10:30AM:** Birding with the Fish Guy: A Multimedia Presentation: AA
Saturday, January 6, 7:00PM: Owl Prowl with Frank: A/T/C10+
Sunday, January 7, 10:30AM: Bird Nest Search and Nest-Making Craft: C5-8
Tuesday, January 9, 10:30AM: Seal Walk at Cupsogue Beach County Park: Adults
Saturday, January 13, DAWN to DUSK: FREE, NYSOA Annual Winter Waterfowl Count: A/T
Saturday, January 13, 10:00AM: FREE, Birding for Beginners Walk in Vineyard Field:
Saturday, January 13, 10:30AM-12:00PM: Hard-shelled Clam Dissection: Biology, Anatomy & Physiology of *Mercenaria mercenaria* - with Rob "Rockfish" Gelling: C8+
Sunday, January 14, 10:30AM: Owl Storytime & Craft: C3-7
Wednesday, January 17, 1:00PM: SOFO's East End Outdoor Nature Education with Crystal at Quogue Wildlife Refuge: C3-7
Saturday, January 20, 10:00-11:30AM: FREE, Moderately-paced 3+ Mile Hike at the Anna and Daniel Mulvihill Preserve and the William Mulvihill Preserve with Dai Dayton: A/T/C10+
Saturday, January 20, 10:00AM: FREE, Young Birders Club Meeting: Ages 8-18
Saturday, January 20, 6:30AM: Sunrise Mindfulness Walk: Adults
Thursday, January 25, 5:00PM: FREE, Full "Wolf Moon" Hike with Friends of the Long Pond Greenbelt: AA
Saturday, January 27, 10:00AM: FREE, Young Environmentalist Society (YES!) Meeting: Ages 10-16
Saturday, January 27, 10:30AM: FREE, Winter Walk at Mashomack Preserve: A/T/C10+
Saturday, January 27, 12:00PM-2:00PM: Seal Cruise, co-sponsored with CRESLI, cresli.org
Sunday, January 28, 10:30AM: Storytime and Meet the Animals: Under the Snow: C3-7

February

- Saturday, February 3, 11:15AM:** Behind-the-Scenes Tour at the Long Island Aquarium: A/T/C10+
Saturday, February 3, 9:00AM: Winter Specialties of Shinnecock: Search for Avian Visitors of the North: A/T/C10+
Saturday, February 3, 10:00AM: FREE, Birding for Beginners Walk in Vineyard Field: A/T/C6+
Sunday, February 4, 10:30AM: Long Island Mammals Survey Presentation: A/T/C10+
Saturday, February 10, 10:30AM-12:30PM: Fish Dissection: The Biology, Anatomy & Physiology of a Bony Fish with Rob "Rockfish" Gelling: A/T/C8+
Saturday, February 10, 12:00PM-2:00PM: Seal Cruise, co-sponsored with CRESLI, cresli.org
Saturday, February 10, 7:30PM: Andy Sabin's Annual Eastern Tiger Salamander Search: AA
Saturday, February 17, 10:00AM: FREE, Young Birders Club Meeting: Ages 8-18
Saturday, February 17, 10:00AM-12:00PM: FREE, Moderately-paced 3 Mile Walk Along the Hills of the Atlantic Gully Trail with Dai Dayton: A/T/C10+
Saturday, February 17, 10:30AM: StoryWalk® - Over in the Forest: Come and Take a Peek: C3-7
Sunday, February 18, 10:30AM: Storytime and Meet the Animals: Salamander Homes: C3-7
Wednesday, February 21, 1:00PM: SOFO's East End Outdoor Nature Education with Crystal at Birch Creek Pond: C3-7

Winter School Break
Outdoor Nature Programs
10:30AM – 11:30AM
For Children of All Ages

Led by SOFO Environmental Educators

Monday, February 19: Where do Animals Go in Winter?

Tuesday, February 20: Spruce Up Your Tree Knowledge

Wednesday, February 21: Where do Bugs Go in Winter?

Thursday, February 22: Nature Bingo

Friday, February 23: Birding for Beginners

Saturday, February 24, 10:00AM:

FREE, Young Environmentalist Society (YES!): Ages 10-16

Saturday, February 24, 12:00PM-2:00PM: Seal Cruise, co-sponsored with CRESLI, cresli.org

Saturday, February 24, 5:30PM: FREE, Full "Snow Moon" Hike with Friends of the Long Pond Greenbelt: AA

Sunday, February 25, 1:30PM: Seal Walk at Cupsogue Beach County Park: A/T/C8+

Saturday, March 2, 7:30PM: Andy Sabin's Annual Blue-spotted Salamander Search: AA

Saturday, March 2, 10:30AM: Origami Animals: A/T/C10+

Sunday, March 3, 10:30AM: Nature Journaling Walk at Hubbard County Park: AA

Saturday, March 9, 11:30AM: Seal Walk at Cupsogue Beach County Park: A/T/C8+

Saturday, March 9 at 10:30AM-12:00 PM: Sea Stars, an Up-Close Observation: The Biology & Adaptations of the Common Sea Star *Asterias forbesi* with Rob "Rockfish" Gelling: A/T/C8+

Saturday, March 9, 12:00PM-2:00PM: Seal Cruise, co-sponsored with CRESLI, cresli.org

Saturday, March 9, 7:30PM: Another Blue-spotted Salamander Search with Andy Sabin: AA

Sunday, March 10, 10:30AM: DIY Wildflower Seed Packets: A/T/C5+

Saturday, March 16, 10:00AM: FREE, Young Birders Club Meeting: Ages 8-18

Saturday, March 16, 10:30PM: Community Pollinator Garden Planting: AA

Saturday, March 16, 8:00PM: Andy Sabin's Annual Spotted Salamander Search: AA

Sunday, March 17, 7:00PM-9:00PM: FREE, Family Trivia Night: AA

Wednesday, March 20, 1:00PM: SOFO's East End Outdoor Nature Education with Crystal at Cupsogue Beach County Park, Westhampton Beach: C3-7

Saturday, March 23, 10:30AM: Honeybees and Honey with Bonac Bees: C2-9

Saturday, March 23, 3:00PM: FREE, Carl Safina Book Reading "Alfie and Me: What Owls Know, What Humans Believe," followed by a Q & A with the author: AA

Sunday, March 24, 10:30AM: Unraveling the Glacial Mysteries of Montauk: A/T/C10+

Sunday, March 24, 12:00PM-2:00PM: Seal Cruise, co-sponsored with CRESLI, cresli.org

Monday, March 25, 6:30PM: FREE, Full "Worm Moon" Hike with Friends of the Long Pond Greenbelt: AA

Saturday, March 30, 10:00AM: FREE, Young Environmentalist Society (YES!): Ages 10-16

Saturday, March 30, 10:00-11:30AM: FREE, Grassland to Grassland: Vineyard Field to Poxabogue County Park Walk with Dai Dayton: A/T/C10+

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Observing Seals with SOFO

commonly transports warmer ocean waters that may disrupt upwelling patterns, where cold, nutrient-rich water is brought up to the surface to provide food for phytoplankton. Changes in nutrient levels can impact population levels throughout the marine food web, and effects may eventually be observed in seal populations.

When observing seals, it is important to keep in mind the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). First enacted in 1972, this federal act prohibits the “taking” of marine mammals within the United States. “Taking” includes activities such as hunting, killing, capturing, and harassing; the MMPA defines harassment as any act that may injure a wild marine mammal or cause a disruption in its behavioral patterns, including migration, feeding, or sheltering. To avoid making the seals aware of your presence, keep noise levels down, stay low and hidden, make slow movements, and stay at least 50 yards (150 feet) downwind from the animals. Additionally, no marine mammals should be touched or fed in the wild. Be sure to call the New York State 24-hour Stranding Hotline at (631) 369-9829 if you believe a seal is stranded and in need of help.

SOFO news

SOFO Shark Researchers Attend Global White Shark Conference

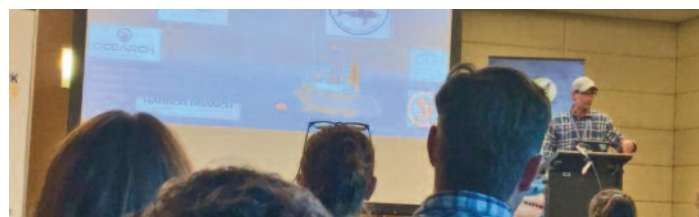
The SOFO Shark Research and Education Program was honored to have their lead scientist Dr. Tobey Curtis and Chief Field Coordinator Greg Metzger attend this year's White Sharks Global Conference. The conference was held in Port Lincoln, South Australia, November 12-17, 2023. This was the first time in 13 years that an international great white shark scientific conference was held. The purpose of the conference was to bring together scientists, managers, and other stakeholders from around the world to share their research and discuss the needs for future work on white sharks.



*Dr. Tobey Curtis, SOFO Shark Research and Education
Program lead scientist*

The week consisted of 65 talks and 7 workshop sessions. Both Tobey and Greg presented on data learned from our young-of-the-year (YOY) white shark work here on Long Island. Tobey spoke about the potential shift in YOY white-shark-suitable nursery habitat caused by climate change, and how that shift could impact the survivability of individuals. Greg spoke about the rapid migratory range expansion of the sharks they have tagged over the first 5 years of their life.

There were countless amazing conversations between the SOFO team and the other 150+ participants. Several opportunities for potential collaborations also emerged.



*Greg Metzger, SOFO Shark Research and Education Program Chief
Field Coordinator*

Two major take-away messages resonated with Tobey and Greg: First, of all the YOY white sharks tagged in the world, the SOFO team has tagged roughly HALF! There was a great deal of interest in our access to this under-studied white shark life stage. Second, SOFO's public messaging regarding New York shark safety in recent summers has been accurate and consistent with other regions around the world dealing with similar challenges—such as California, South Africa, and eastern Australia.

Overall, this was an amazing opportunity for SOFO's shark research to be represented on the world stage!

SOFO Seeks Photo Submissions for 2025 Wall Calendar

SOFO is starting to compile pictures for our 2025 Wall Calendar and we would like to open picture submissions to middle and high school students in Southampton and East Hampton townships. Pictures can be from 2024 through the past 5 years of local scenery and local flora and fauna, in any season. For each picture selected, we will list the student's name, school, location of picture, and a short description in the appropriate month, as well as crediting the photographer on the back of the calendar. A generous donor is providing compensation of \$100 for Front Cover picture, \$50 for each month's main picture, and \$25 for small monthly filler pictures. Please send your submissions to cposchl@sofo.org by June 17, 2024; selected pictures will be announced to the photographers by July 22, 2024.

New Tick Awareness Signs at SOFO

In collaboration with Stony Brook Southampton Hospital, the Town of Southampton, and Suffolk County Department of Health Services, SOFO is happy to have been selected as a pilot site for new tick awareness signs. These signs have been placed strategically at SOFO trailheads leading into Vineyard Field and the Long Pond Greenbelt Preserve. Anyone with a smartphone can get real-time expert advice on prevention via a QR code. The QR code links to both TickEncounter.org as well as Stony Brook Southampton Hospital's local tick disease website: EastEndTickResource.org. We are very thankful to have this opportunity to inform museum visitors and hikers on the best ways to protect themselves from tick-borne diseases.



*Left to right: Southampton Town Councilman Tommy John Schiavoni;
Karen Wulffraat, Director of Community Outreach for Stony Brook
Southampton Hospital's Regional Tick-Borne Disease Resource Center;
Hayground School Apprenticeship Students: Amaree Charlton, Ian Bravo,
Orion Hagedorn; Robert Gelling, SOFO Environmental Educator*

SOFO Participates in Hayground School's Job Apprenticeship Program

by Melanie Meade, SOFO Education Director

Notice any new young faces at SOFO this fall? SOFO hosted several middle school students from Hayground School's Apprenticeship Program from late September to early November.

Elizabeth Bertsch, Hayground School teacher and Apprenticeship Program Director describes the program:

"Hayground School's apprenticeship program is designed for children between the ages of 12 and 14 who thrive on the school's intensity, the emphasis on depth over breadth, insistence on authentic work, the development of expertise, and the school's powerful sense of community. Hayground's oldest students work as apprentices in an industry or place of business within the local community. These apprenticeships occur three mornings weekly and run for eight weeks in the fall semester. The experience concludes with a final written piece and a presentation to the school community. This year, our students are apprenticing at the South Fork Natural History Museum and Nature Center, The Children's Museum of the East End, Complements Boutique in Bridgehampton, L & W Market, Animal Rescue Fund of the Hamptons (ARF), The Watermill Center, Oyster Farming on the Shinnecock Reservation, and the Veterinary Clinic of the East End."

Three of Ms. Bertsch's students—Ian Bravo, Amaree Charlton, and Orion Hagedorn—spent part of their school days at SOFO for several days each week, assisting SOFO educators with animal care and facilitating visitors education experience with the museum's interactive habitat themed exhibits and seashore animal touch tank; they also helped with gift shop management and outdoor education on the nature trail behind the museum. The students' impressions of their job experience left no doubt that this program had a profound impact on Hayground students.



Orion Hagedorn guiding visitors in experiencing stick insects

SOFO educators shared their job responsibilities and educational backgrounds with the students; that gave them opportunities to take on animal feedings and habitat cleanings, interact with visitors, and



Amaree Charlton presenting male and female Eastern box turtles to a class

learn about SOFO's native reptiles, amphibians and common local sea creatures. Ian, Amaree, and Orion put their new knowledge into practice when a younger class of students from Hayground School visited the museum. They each presented a reptile or amphibian and shared information about the animal's habitat, life cycle, and environmental issues and concerns.



Ian Bravo presenting the milk snake to students

SOFO's mission is to stimulate interest in, advance knowledge of, and foster appreciation for the natural environment, with special emphasis on the unique natural history of Long Island's South Fork. An experience like Hayground's Apprenticeship Program lets students learn while doing and be guided by their own interests as they explore our



Ian, Amaree, and Orion birding at SOFO

SOFO Mission

The mission of the South Fork Natural History Museum (SOFO) is to stimulate interest in, advance knowledge of, and foster appreciation for the natural world with special emphasis on the unique natural environment of Long Island's South Fork.

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