

Owls and unnatural collisions

Roads are unique systems that differ from the neighbouring areas. The grassy areas right next to roads give shelter to many smaller animals, while a good food supply is on hand because drivers throw garbage out of car windows, or trucks spill grain on the road. Predators such as owls follow their prey to the roadside, often with deadly consequences.

As nocturnal hunters, owls are vulnerable to being killed by cars when the headlights dazzle them, and they don't move out of the way. Our own vision is poorer at night and so we react more slowly, with the result that collisions can happen more easily.

Fences can also be dangerous. A flying owl does not look straight ahead, but will scan the area a distance off, looking for prey. Natural obstacles such as trees are easy to see, but the thin strands of a barbed wire fence are less visible. Owls and other birds often fly into the top strands of these types of fences and are then caught in the barbs, dying slow deaths through thirst, starvation and shock.



How you can be owl wise

You can make a difference to owls in a few easy ways:

- stay within the speed limit and slow down when driving after dark or in misty conditions to ensure that you can react in time;
- if you encounter an owl on the road, it might not move out of the way because the bright headlights of your car temporarily blind it. In this case, slow down, dim the headlights and hoot if the bird still does not move off;
- avoid littering, as excess food will attract rodents to the roadside, with owls following.

BoPWG's Owl Projects

BoPWG runs an online database at www.ewt.org.za/owls, where you can report road and fence collisions. We use this data to identify areas of the country that need attention, so that we can make the best use of our resources.

We also run two projects that are working towards finding solutions to owl road and fence deaths. The Nashua Central Owl Project monitors a section of the N17 highway on the East Rand of the Gauteng province, and the Bakwena Owl Project monitors the N1N4 Platinum Toll Highway north and west of Pretoria.

The Nashua Central Owl Project

This project was the first to spark interest in road-related owl deaths. Many owls, mostly Marsh and Grass Owls, but also Spotted Eagle-Owls and Barn Owls, are killed by traffic on the N17 highway in Gauteng. A research project revealed that the main cause was grain spillage on the road, which attracts rodents, and in turn, owls to the road.

The short-term solution to this problem is the implementation of a concept dubbed 'owl restaurants', where grain is left some distance inland from the road, and a pole placed nearby as a perch for the owls. Rodents are thus attracted away from the

road with owls following. The long-term solution however is to stop grain spillage, and so the project team is working with transport companies responsible for grain spillage, and also the farmers who hire these companies.

The Bakwena Owl Project

Owl monitoring has been ongoing along the Platinum Toll Highway in the Pretoria North area since late 2004. The area includes the N1 between Pretoria North and Warmbaths, and the N4 between Pretoria North and Brits. This section of road was constructed and opened to traffic in 2003. BoPWG is coordinating the programme, while the company that built and maintains the road collects owl carcasses and data with the help of its route patrol officers. The officers received training in owl identification and basic monitoring, and have been crucial to the success of the project.

It is clear that there are areas of good owl habitat along the highway. It is also clear that the road structure itself has little effect on how many owls are killed, and that it is simply a matter of owls being present and so being killed. As such, the end objective of this project may be refocused towards safeguarding and enhancing these habitats and increasing public awareness about owls, rather than looking for ways to reduce mortalities where a specific reason such as grain spillage does not exist.

More information

We are always keen to hear from the public about areas where owls are under threat from traffic. Please keep an eye open for road and fence collisions and let us know through our database at www.ewt.org.za/owls.

To learn more about owls in South Africa, please contact us for our booklet 'Owls and humankind living in harmony', or contact us directly on 011 486 1102.



NASHUA
CENTRAL

BAKWENA
N1N4 toll

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