

# Learning Lessons From Owls

## Book explores human relationship with nature

BY CAILIN RILEY

“One can travel the world and go nowhere. One can be stuck keeping the faith at home and discover a new world.”

It’s a paradox that the author and naturalist Carl Safina lays out in the prologue of his new book, *Alfie and Me*. What *Owls Know*, *What Humans Believe*, which was released earlier this month.

Safina and his wife, Patricia Paladines, learned the truth underpinning that pair of seeming contradictions in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, after rescuing and rehabilitating an eastern screech owl, which they named Alfie, at their home in East Setauket.

Safina is the author of seven previous books for adults and four books for children and young readers based on the natural world. He is also a professor at Stony Brook University and the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship — also known as the “Genius Grant” — and in 2020 and 2021 he has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Time*, *The Guardian*, *Audubon* and *National Geographic*.

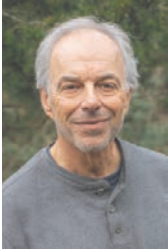
Safina calls his latest work “a story of profound beauties and magical writing harbored within a year unended,” taking the reader not only through the details of the screech owl’s rehabilitation but how that experience led Safina on a deeper philosophical exploration of the natural world and mankind’s place in it.

“I wanted to better understand how various peoples have sought and seen answers about how to be human in the living world,” he writes in the prologue. Alfie had a near-death experience as an infant in 2018 and came to the Safinas after being discovered by a friend, on the ground, wet, defenseless and covered in fly eggs. Safina had nursed a baby owl back to health years ago, when he was in his 20s, and because he is also a university ecologist and has permits for wildlife rehab, bird banding and falconry, he was a natural fit to bring the owl back to health and, in time, to help her make a return to her natural home in the wild. Alfie’s road to that eventual recovery was longer than expected because of a developmental delay that caused her feathers to come in late, which

complicated and prolonged her time under the direct care of Safina and his wife. During that time, Alfie became part of the family, which at that time included two dogs, several chickens, a snake and two parrots.

The developmental delay ultimately did not prevent Alfie from adjusting to life in the wild, but it meant she had to spend longer than originally anticipated in a semi-captive state to ensure her survival, leading to a special kind of bond between Safina, his wife and Alfie.

The fact that the bond was formed during the pandemic



Carl Safina PATRICIA M. PALADINES

it made it a different journey entirely for Safina as well, which he outlines in the book.

“Had the year proceeded as planned, my scheduled travels would have caused me to miss all the fine details of her life, her courtship, mating, and their raising of youngsters,” he writes in the book. “Had the year proceeded as it did — but without her — it would have been all the more grueling. She was literally a bright thing in our nights. And she was a metaphor for sanity, at a time when sanity seemed increasingly at risk.”

Indeed, Alfie’s story is the kind of uplifting, feel-good bit of news people long for, an underdog survival story with a happy ending, and a main character who is, quite simply, adorable.

Not only did Alfie escape an almost certain death, she thrived under the care of Safina, made her way into the world, found a mate, and so far has raised 10 owlets in total, never losing a fledgling. She repaid the care and kindness extended to her by Safina and his wife by remaining in close proximity

and even allowing physical contact, often coming when they called to her.

“It’s an enchanting story, and anybody who hears about it is enchanted,” Safina said in an interview earlier this week, a few days after two stops at local bookstores.

He spoke at Ciano’s Books in Sag Harbor in October, a day after an event at Book Hampton in East Hampton. The book tour also includes stops at bookstores in New York City, Chicago, Connecticut and New Hampshire.

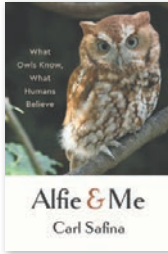
People who attend those events are interested in hearing about the process behind writing the book, and diving deeper into the insights and philosophical journey that Safina went on while observing Alfie and taking notes that would ultimately form the basis for the book. But of course, they are eager for an update on Alfie.

“There are two main things that have happened since the book was finished,” Safina shared. “Her first mate, Plus One, who was there in 2020 and 2021 — and they raised a total of six young in those two years — something happened to him in 2022, and he did not return, and she did not have a mate. She laid four eggs that she sat on for more than the normal amount of time, and it was very distressing for me. I felt like she was keeping the faith in a world that had broken its promise. That was my projecting, but nonetheless that was how it seemed. So it was a sad spring.”

This year, however, Alfie found a new mate — and not a moment too soon. “In February, she was calling and calling, and in March she was calling and calling, and nobody was there. And then in late March, another owl showed up,” Safina said. “He’s very different from Plus One; they have different personalities.”

Plus One, Safina explained, was comfortable with his mate’s unusually close relationship with two humans and their menagerie of animal companions of different species, tolerant of Safina and his wife being in their sights. This was not the case with Alfie’s new mate.

“The new one hated me near the nest,” Safina said. “He was constantly trying to drive me away. He hit me in the head one time after one of the young ones came out of the nest.”



Alfie still found parenting success with her new mate, despite his elusiveness and overprotectiveness. She laid five eggs, with four hatching, and all four owlets fledged.

Because he did not know what was in store for him or for Alfie when she first came to his home, bedraggled and barely alive, Safina did not know for some time that Alfie would become the subject of a book. But he made the kind of preparations an experienced writer and keen observer and lover of the natural world might be expected to make.

“Early on I didn’t know if this little thing was going to survive. I assumed as soon as she could fly, she would start the process of leaving us,” he said. “Because I know that sometimes things just turn into larger stories, I just started taking quite detailed notes, as if I was taking notes for a book. As the situation got more complex, with two owls and then five owls when the young ones hatched, I did a lot of following them around the backyard, dictating voice notes that I later listened to and typed out.”

“I had a lot of material, and when the young ones dispersed the territory and breeding season was over and everyone had lived, I had all these notes that were so surprising to me about how their relationship developed. As soon as the young ones dispersed, I knew I had a good book there.”

The experience of raising and rehabilitating Alfie, and witnessing her transition to an independent, unique life, securing a mate and raising her own babies while holding on to the bond she developed with Safina and his wife, sparked an intense curiosity about the way humans relate to the natural world.

“It really heightened this sense of relationship and the importance of relationship,” Safina said, “and it sent me on a journey that I never really took before, comparing what other cultures have had to say about the human place in the world.”

# Stand With Israel Concert Held

BY CAILIN RILEY

On Saturday, November 25, the Hampton Synagogue hosted a special “Stand With Israel” concert event in Westhampton Beach, featuring the music of Israel, with a lineup of songs performed by Netanel Hershtik, Shiree Kidron and Gilad Paz, with musical accompaniment by the Rambam Trio and a keynote address from Rabbi Marc Schneider.

The pain and horror of the October 7 terrorist attacks in Israel and the ongoing war in Gaza are still fresh in the minds of those in the Jewish community, particularly with the rise in antisemitic attacks throughout the country. But Schneider said he was not interested in creating a somber, reserved environment at the synagogue on Saturday night.

“It was very unique, very upbeat and uplifting,” he said of the concert. “My philosophy throughout the war has been to transition from despair to determination.”

The congregation seemed to agree. The standing-room-only crowd revelled in the music, and Schneider said it showed, quite literally.

“The place was shaking,” he said. “I saw the walls of that sanctuary shaking — that was the resonance, and the intensity of the music.”

During his keynote address, the rabbi reminded the congregation that the state of Israel is as strong as ever.

“2023 is not 1938,” he said. “Hamas mistakenly thought they were targeting defenseless and helpless Jews, but we’re no longer defenseless and helpless. We have a sovereign Jewish state with one of the most powerful militaries in the world.”

Schneider also reminded the congregation that the Jewish people are “not alone,” noting the support from President Joe Biden, Governor Kathy Hochul, the leaders of France, Germany and Argentina, as well as those in Arab- and Muslim-majority countries like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.

Schneider is not content with leaders simply condemning hate and antisemitic violence — he seeks action. He said he challenged State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli — who was in attendance Saturday night — to do something proactive in addition to condemning antisemitism and violence.

DiNapoli heeded the call, announcing that he had sent letters to the heads of 50 of the top corporations in the country, including Nike, Meta and Tesla, urging them to sign the Anti-Defamation League’s Workplace Pledge To Fight Antisemitism.

DiNapoli also called on the New York State Common Retirement Fund’s portfolio companies to join the ADL pledge.

“He was the first comptroller in the U.S. to weigh in like that,” Schneider said. “He has challenged other comptrollers to do the same.”



From left, concert performers Gilad Paz, Shiree Kidron and Netanel Hershtik. COURTESY HAMPTON SYNAGOGUE

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