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Observation of a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) bathing in a rainwater pool in Jamaica

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Photo: Gary R. Graves

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Abstract I observed a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) bathing in a rainwater pool near Portland Point Lighthouse, Clarendon Parish, Jamaica. This appears to be the first published instance of bathing behavior in a wild individual of this cosmopolitan species in the Western Hemisphere.

Keywords Barn Owl, bathing, Jamaica, Portland Ridge, *Tyto alba*, West Indies

Resumen Observaciones de un ejemplar de *Tyto alba* bañándose en un charco de agua de lluvia en Jamaica—Observé un ejemplar de *Tyto alba* bañándose en un charco de agua de lluvia cerca del faro de Portland Point, distrito de Clarendon, Jamaica. Esta parece ser la primera publicación de este tipo de conducta en un individuo silvestre de esta especie cosmopolita en el Hemisferio Occidental.

Palabras clave baño, Caribe Insular, Jamaica, Portland Ridge, *Tyto alba*

Résumé Observation d'une Effraie des clochers (*Tyto alba*) se baignant dans une flaque d'eau de pluie en Jamaïque—Une Effraie des clochers (*Tyto alba*) a été observée se baignant dans une flaque d'eau de pluie près du phare de Portland Point, Clarendon Parish, en Jamaïque. Cela semble être la première mention publiée de ce comportement chez un individu sauvage appartenant à cette espèce cosmopolite dans l'hémisphère occidental.

Mots clés Antilles, baignade, Effraie des clochers, Jamaïque, Portland Ridge, *Tyto alba*

Bathing behavior in owls, particularly of nocturnal species, is poorly known and rarely observed in the wild (Cramp 1985, Bruce 1999, Marks *et al.* 1999). The sole published report of bathing in a free-living tytonid owl (19 species in *Tyto* and *Phodilus*), revealed by a comprehensive literature search, was of a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) that was flushed from a stream during the afternoon in England (Bunn *et al.* 1982). Photographs of Barn Owls bathing in captivity have been posted on several internet websites but none of these instances appear to have been published in a peer-reviewed outlet.

This cosmopolitan raptor is arguably the best studied species of owl (Bunn *et al.* 1982, Cramp 1985). Broadly distributed in North and South America (American Ornithologists' Union 1998), it occurs widely in Cuba, Hispaniola, and Jamaica in the Greater Antilles (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000, Keith *et al.* 2003, Haynes-Sutton *et al.* 2009). Here I report what apparently is the first observation of bathing behavior of a wild Barn Owl in the Western Hemisphere.

Observation

On the evening of 10 December 2013 (1925 hr), a Barn Owl flew into the field of view illuminated by the headlights of my vehicle and landed at the margin of a large rainwater pool in the deeply rutted coastal road (17°45.3'N, 77°10.3'W; WGS-84) near Portland Point Lighthouse, Clarendon Parish, Jamaica (Fig. 1). The owl immediately commenced bathing. I exited the vehicle and observed and photographed the owl from a distance of ~30 m. During the observation period (3 min), the owl waded into deeper water past its tarsal joints, peered slowly from side to side, drooped its tail and wing tips in the water, and dipped its bill and breast into the water several times, wetting the ventral feathers from throat to belly. The extent to which the owl's behavior was altered by the headlights and photographic flashes is unknown. However, the owl appeared to be relatively unconcerned by the light before it took flight. Inspection of the pool afterward revealed no potential food items.

Discussion

The observation site lies in dry limestone forest skirting mangrove tidal flats at the base of the karstic Portland Ridge, one of the driest areas of Jamaica (Loveless and Asprey 1957). Portland Ridge experiences short rainy seasons in May and June and again in October followed by an extended dry season from December through April. There are no known permanent sources of fresh or brackish water within several kilometers of the sighting. The

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Fig. 1. Barn Owl bathing in a rainwater pool in Clarendon Parish, Jamaica. The photographs (1/200 sec f/5.6 ISO-5000), selected from a series of 14, were taken with a Canon EOS 60D camera equipped with a 400 mm lens by the author.

observation indicates that Barn Owls inhabiting arid environments take advantage of rare ephemeral sources of freshwater for bathing.

The extensively pale secondaries of the owl indicate that it represents *Tyto alba fuscata*, the resident race of the Greater Antilles (Ridgway 1914, Keith *et al.* 2003), rather than the mainland North American race, *T. a. pratincola*, which has been recorded as a migrant in the Greater Antilles (Keith *et al.* 2003).

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