



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist

by Jim Anderson

An unexpected encounter

The last thing the staff and customers of Lowe's in Bend expected to see last week was a lone common poorwill (a bird very closely related to a nighthawk) standing in the middle of the garden center.

You have to admit, that bundle of feathers with red eyes just doesn't fit into a bird category unless someone knows a little more about birds than "robins eat worms."

One of Lowe's employees picked it up and thought it was a baby owl. But a customer just happened to see the bird and knew it for what it is. She also knew if it was being carried around without putting up a struggle something was wrong with it and also knew who to call for help: Elise Wolf of Native Bird Care in Sisters.

Currently, the poorwill is undergoing an intense

bathing regime in an effort to remove some kind of gunk the bird got into while it was exploring Lowe's garden department. The usual method for removing oils is using Dawn detergent. But the stuff on the Lowe's bird is persistent and sticky, so Elise has to work harder in an attempt to remove it.

The bird is also devouring hundreds of mealworms and crickets daily, which set Elise and her husband, Whitney, back \$40 plus shipping for just mealworms.

Poorwills are medium-sized nocturnal or crepuscular (the latter a time of sparse light between sunset and darkness and darkness and dawn), and they are equipped with long wings, short, weak legs, very short bills and a BIG mouth.

In some areas they're called goatsuckers, due to ancient folk tales that claimed they sucked milk from goats. Goatsuckers of the New World (our western species) are called nighthawks, others poorwills, and they nest on the ground.

In this neck of the woods you have to be careful when driving little-used roads at night as both poorwills and nighthawks stop to rest in the middle of the roads. Both give off a very distinct eyeshine at night, manifested by just two tiny red spots in the darkness. If you see that

at night in the road, get your foot off the gas pedal and on the brake; it will probably be a goatsucker.

Nightjars have small feet, of little use for walking, and to perch on a limb they must do so lengthways — which also makes them look like a stick, and their soft plumage is cryptically colored to resemble bark, leaves, and sand and gravel.

Now, here comes the real mystery about nightjars, especially poorwills: They (and hummingbirds) are the only birds known to go into a torpor, defined as a state of decreased physiological activity in an animal, usually caused by reduced body temperature and metabolic rate, very similar to hibernation. While hummingbirds can go into torpor for up to 12 hours, common poorwills can do it all through the winter — as in hibernation.

Which opens the door to the possibility that the poorwill now in Elise's care may have flown into Lowe's late last summer and has been there hibernating through winter. Or, perhaps a better scenario, it was passing through the night before and thought Lowe's looked like a good motel for a day's rest.

You call it.

Elise plans to release



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Yep, it's a bird — honest! Look at its eyes. It's an adult common poorwill on the mend at Elise Wolf's Native Bird Care facility in Sisters.

"Sticky" as soon as the night-moving moths and insects are abundant, and since poorwills fly very close

to the ground and often rest at night in the middle of the road...

Well, you know.



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