

Tiny owl saved after getting stuck in Rockefeller Center's Christmas tree

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A worker setting up the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree made an unusual discovery: this tiny owl hiding near the tree's base. Photo: Ellen Kalish/The Washington Post

Ellen Kalish runs a center for rescued wild animals in New York. When a woman asked if she could treat an owl, she was happy to help.

Then, the caller told her exactly where the tiny owl was hiding out. It was the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center in New York City!

Kalish was surprised. She is the head of the Ravensbeard Wildlife Center. Kalish said she has been helping wild animals for 20 years. She has never heard a story like that.

The rescued owl has been nicknamed "Rockefeller." Some say it is the best part of that tree.

The traditional Christmas tree got off to a rocky start this year. It is a 75-foot-tall Norway spruce from Oneonta, New York. It arrived looking a bit sad. Many laughed at its sagging branches and thin needles.

No one knew a small bird was hiding inside.

A Long Journey To Manhattan

When workers were unwrapping the tree, one of them spotted the creature. It was buried in the base of the tree, Kalish said. At first the worker thought the owl might be injured. It would not let go of the tree's base.

One of the workers called his wife. He told her he was bringing the owl home. He asked if she could find a place that helps wildlife animals. She called Kalish.

The raptor most likely rode in the tree on its 170-mile journey to New York. A raptor is a type of bird that eats live prey. The owl is the smallest of its kind living in the Northeast. So how did Rockefeller end up stuck in the tree in the first place?

Kalish offered a few ideas. He could have gone to the tree to hide and got trapped later, she said. Maybe once the tree was loaded onto a truck, the branches squished him into the trunk. He might have been too scared to move.

"There is no proof," Kalish said. The owl could have flown in from Central Park in New York, but Kalish doesn't believe that's true.

"That would be the last place he would want to go," Kalish said. The area around the tree is busy and noisy. "Why would he pick that tree if he had a choice not to?" she said. "He's smart, and he wouldn't do that."

Back Into The Wild

Kalish met the woman who first called her at a gas station. The woman handed her a cardboard box with the owl inside. Kalish was surprised by what she found.

"He looked up at me, and I was relieved to see that he was looking in relatively good shape," Kalish said of their first meeting. She was impressed that he didn't look worse.

Kalish brought Rockefeller back to the wildlife center. She said she gave him plenty of water and left two mice in the plastic pet carrier. They were gone by the next morning.

Rockefeller spent most of his time at the wildlife center eating or sleeping. On Monday, he went to the vet to get some X-rays taken. He has no broken bones, Kalish added.

Rockefeller will not spend much time at the center, she said. She is preparing to release him soon. He will fly away at dusk. That's the time when owls normally wake up. The release will be quick and quiet, she said, and she will bring a camera to take pictures of him flying away.

"I will wish him a very long and happy life," Kalish said. "For me, it's the Christmas miracle of 2020."