

“Other Duties As Assigned”

Amy Ballard

About a year out of college in 1976, I came to work at the Smithsonian for James Goode, the keeper of the Smithsonian Building. At that time, our office dealt exclusively with concerns about the building: for example, preparing for the visit of Queen Elizabeth II, purchasing a piece of antique furniture, ordering carpet for the Great Hall, taking care of barn owls. The last job was clearly in the category “other duties as assigned,” often seen on Smithsonian job descriptions.

Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, an ornithologist, determined that a nest of barn owls in one of the towers of the Castle would add a nineteenth-century ambience to the building. The first pair of owls, brought to the Castle in 1971 and installed in the southwest tower, flew the coop. Ripley arranged for a second pair of owls to be delivered from the National Zoo in 1977. It fell to us to take care of them.

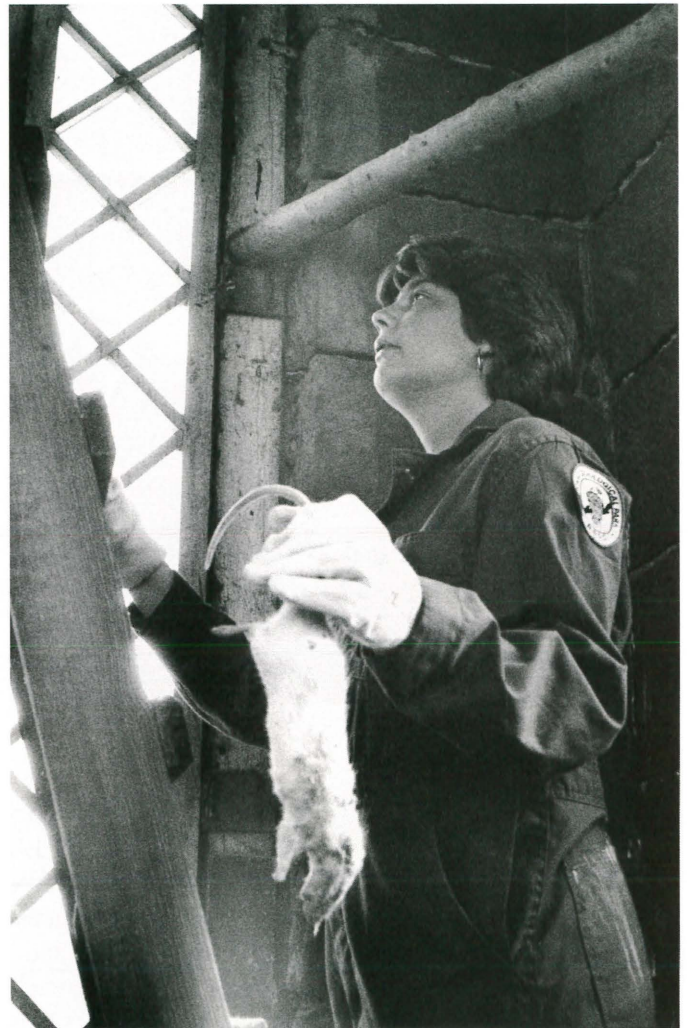
I was to feed them, a “very great honor and responsibility,” according to James Goode. I would ascend career heights on a wooden ladder to the nest, wearing a jumpsuit that said “National Zoo Birds” and a motorcycle helmet for protection in case the owls decided to swoop down on me.

Four times a week the Zoo delivered the owls’ food — a dozen freshly electrocuted white mice or six dead white rats — tastefully placed in a black plastic sack, to our basement office. Gathering my gear, I climbed the ladder and threw open a trap door to the owls’ nest. Duties included cleaning up the remains of the previous feeding, placing the fresh food in a corner with some water, listening for sounds of movement, and reporting on the general state of owl life in a logbook.

I soon enlisted some volunteers — telling them, of course, of the “very great honor.” Summer approached, and the heat and smell became unbearable. I was relieved to become a once-a-week feeder.

In mid-summer we were rewarded with the arrival of several owlets. The parents, who had been docile up to this point, became extremely protective, descending upon me and pecking at my helmet-covered head. Terrified, I hastily climbed down the ladder for the last time.

The brave volunteers kept feeding and tracking the little family. The Zoo decided that the time had come to open the tower window and see if the owls would roost. After a few returns to the roost, the owl family beat a hasty retreat and never came back again. So ended one of my many adventures carrying out “other duties as assigned.”



Amy Ballard approaches her charges with meal in hand.

Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution

Amy Ballard is currently a historical preservation specialist with the Smithsonian’s Architectural History and Historic Preservation Division.

Adapted from Cynthia R. Field, Richard E. Stamm and Heather P. Ewing, The Castle, An Illustrated History of the Smithsonian Building (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993). Used by permission of the publisher.