March 9, 2025
House Bill 5704
Chair Stephen Casey
House Committee on Municipal Government and Housing

Submitted by:
Sheida Soleimani, Founder & Executive Director, Congress of the Birds

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

My name is Sheida Soleimani. I am an artist and an Associate Professor at Brandeis University, but most relevant to why I am here today, I am a federally and state-licensed wildlife rehabilitator and the Founder and Executive Director of Congress of the Birds—the only rehabilitation center in Rhode Island dedicated exclusively to the care, rehabilitation, and release of wild birds.

Every year, we provide critical care to thousands of birds, the vast majority of whom arrive at our center due to injuries caused by human activity. From window collisions to habitat destruction, these birds face urgent threats, and at Congress of the Birds, we are committed to giving them a second chance at survival. As a wildlife rehabilitator, my phone number is public. Every day, I receive calls from concerned members of the public who have found an injured bird. This was the case just a few weeks ago when two students from Brown University reached out about a Barred Owl in distress.

I'm going to assume that most people have not seen an owl, hawk, or eagle up close. That was certainly true for these two students—both members of the Brown Birdwatching Club—who had come across a Barred Owl hunched on the pavement near the university's faculty club. One of them excitedly remarked, "I usually see birds through binoculars—I've always wanted to see an owl!" But the other quietly added, "I've always wanted to see an owl up close too, but… I wish it wasn't like this."

As birdwatchers, they knew something was wrong. It was midday, and the nocturnal owl sat motionless, barely reacting to people walking by. Next to it was a black plastic box—the unmistakable housing of rat poison bait. I knew immediately what had happened.

This was a tragic way for these students to see their first owl up close. But when I say "up close," I mean in your hands. To really understand the devastating effects of rodenticide, there's nothing more heart wrenching than holding a dying bird of prey in your hands. As a rehabber, I've learned what to look for when I intake a bird of prey, or scavenging bird. Is it showing neurological signs? Is its mouth pale? Is it covered in bruises? Is it actively bleeding, and its blood wont clot?

This owl showed every single one of these signs.

I quickly wrapped it in a towel and told the students I needed to get it back to my clinic immediately if it had any chance of survival. They asked, "Do you think it will be okay?" I had to tell them the truth: "Probably not—but I will do everything I can."
Before leaving, I took a quick photo of the owl beside one of the many rodenticide bait boxes nearby. Then, I rushed it back to our clinic.
Barred Owls, despite their fluffy appearance, are actually quite small—and in a body so small, even a little blood loss is catastrophic. This owl was bleeding from its mouth and nostrils, and the blood wouldn't clot– it dripped onto the stainless steel of my exam table, forming a bright red pool. It was losing blood fast. I needed to work faster.

I parted its feathers, searching for its skin. Just as I suspected—its breast, abdomen, and legs were covered in deep purple bruises. The inside of its mouth was pale, saliva thick and tacky from severe dehydration. Its barely open eyes looked up at me, confused and terrified.

In moments like these, I can't help but wonder—do they know they are dying? What do they feel as needles pierce their bodies and tubes are pushed down their throats, as I fight to save them while they slowly slip away?

I did everything I could. Vitamin K to counteract the anticoagulant effects. Toxiban—a charcoal suspension—to absorb any remaining poison. Fluids to replace lost blood. Anti-inflammatories for pain—because it was probably in so much pain. I placed the owl in our oxygen chamber, and hoped for the best. But I already knew what was coming.

A few hours later, the owl died. Face down in the oxygen chamber, eyes barely open, beak wide as if screaming. I will never forget its face.

I will never forget the face of any bird I've lost to rodenticides.

In 2024 alone, Congress of the Birds admitted 148 birds of prey, including various owls, hawks, and even a bald eagle. Every single one of them was exposed to rodenticides. Of those 148, 86 died or had to be euthanized because of their injuries.

How do these birds get poisoned? The answer is simple: through the food chain. Rodenticides are designed to kill slowly, so poisoned rodents remain alive long enough to be eaten by predators—owls, hawks, eagles, foxes, and even household pets. When these animals consume poisoned rodents, the toxins accumulate in their bodies, leading to secondary poisoning. This cycle continues up the food chain, affecting larger predators and even scavengers like vultures

and crows. In some cases, rodenticide compounds have even been detected in mountain lions and other apex predators.

How many more must suffer before we take action? How many hundreds more will die in my arms?

Rodenticides are not a necessary evil—they are an unnecessary cruelty. Effective, non-toxic alternatives exist. The continued use of these poisons is not just killing rodents; it is killing our wildlife—our owls, hawks, eagles, and the very ecosystems we strive to protect. The only way to prevent these deaths is to fully ban the use of these poisons.

I urge you to support House Bill 5704 and take a stand against rodenticides. Let the Barred Owl—the one those students saw only too late—be one of the last to fall victim to these deadly poisons. Thank you for your time, your consideration, and your commitment to protecting Rhode Island's wildlife.

Sincerely,

Sheida Soleimani, Executive Director, Congress of the Birds

* A Barred Owl found injured at the Brown Faculty Club in Providence, RI. Surrounding the injured owl were 3 rat poison bait boxes.