



A publication by:

NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Barred Owl

Strix varia



Introduction

Barred owls (*Strix varia*) are present in nearly every forested region of North America. Due to their broad distribution across the continent, these birds are known by many different names including Swamp Owl, Wood Owl, Rain Owl and Striped Owl. These names reflect both the creature's physical appearance, as well as its preferred habitat. Barred owls are bulky birds with large round heads, dark eyes and yellow bills. They also feature dark barring on their breasts and vertical streaking along their bellies. This species of owl can be found living in swamps, as well as dense hardwood and conifer forests.

Characteristics

The barred owl is relatively large compared to other species of owl. Its body is quite stocky and generally between 41-60cm long, with a short tail and a wingspan of approximately one meter. A healthy adult can weigh between 1-2.5lbs, with females often outweighing males. Unlike some species, these owls do not have ear tufts or brightly coloured eyes; instead, they have dark brown eyes and a rounded head with no ear tufts. These birds also have unique markings, including horizontal bars across the top part of their chest, followed by light and dark bars cascading down the front of their body.

Barred owls are closely related to other species, including the great horned owl, and the spotted owl. While similar to barred owls, great horned owls are larger overall, with longer tails, yellow eyes, and ear tufts. The barred owl's closest relative is the spotted owl. These birds are alike in almost every way, except spotted owls are somewhat smaller; they also display a spotted pattern along the front of their body, instead of bars and stripes. Some resources note that the barred owl is more adaptable and aggressive than its close relative, the spotted owl. Recent range expansions have brought the two species into closer contact, which has resulted in the barred owl displacing the spotted owl, as well as occasional interbreeding.



Great Horned Owl



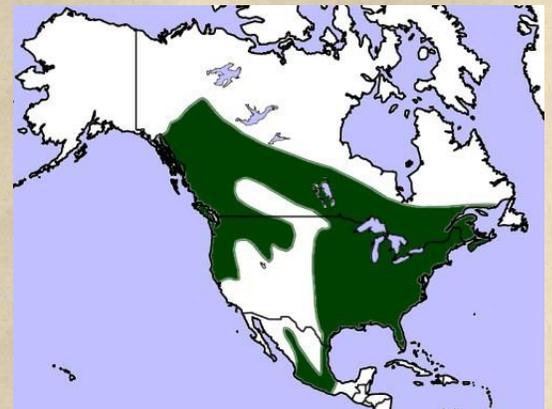
Spotted Owl

Lifecycle

Generally barred owls lay 2-4 white, sphere shaped eggs per brood (grouping of eggs) and will have one or two broods per year. Barred owls begin life with their eyes closed, totally helpless and covered in white down. The young leave the nest, at about 4 weeks, they are not able to fly, but crawl out of the nest using their beak and talons to sit on branches. The young birds are able to fly approximately 40 days after birth, but are supported by their parents for at least 4 months; much longer than most other owls. Offspring generally do not travel far from their place of birth, most times travelling less than ten kilometers before starting their independent lives. The lifespan of these birds varies, but some have been known to live in the wild for up to eighteen years.

Habitat

Barred owls are widespread, though not evenly so, across North America from British Columbia across to the Maritimes and much of the eastern U.S. This species prefers deep moist forests, wooded swamps, and woodlands near waterways. Barred owls can also be found in forested urban areas like North and West Vancouver, although they favour old growth forest due to the high number of large dead trees used for nesting. While barred owls are now common in northwestern North America; their traditional habitat is on the eastern side of the continent. Human activities including tree planting in the Great Plains and forest fire suppression have allowed these birds to migrate west. Barred owls have only been living in British Columbia since the 1940's, and didn't reach the rainforests of the south coast until the 1970's.



Barred Owl Distribution

Behaviour

The typical diet of a barred owl includes a mixture of small mammals, most especially rodents, birds, amphibians, reptiles, insects and spiders. Like most owls, barred owls hunt from perches using their excellent hearing and eyesight to spot prey on the ground below. Once the prey has been spotted, the owl swoops from its perch and snatches its victim with razor sharp talons. Barred owls are nocturnal predators; usually hunting just after sunset and before dawn. They are highly territorial and will defend their nesting site and hunting grounds aggressively against other birds and humans. These birds

do not migrate or travel around much unless forced to move due to an extreme lack of food. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology noted that of 158 birds that were banded and then found later, none had moved farther than 6 miles away. The mating season for barred owls begins in January and continues until September. During this time, males and females exchange a series of calls and gestures in an attempt to attract one another. Once these birds are successfully paired, they remain mates for life. That being said, barred owls spend most of their lives alone, and only socialize with their partners while mating and raising young.

Barred owls have a distinct and very recognizable voice. These owls are clear-voiced and expressive, generating a *hoo hoo ho-ho*, *hoo hoo ho-hooooaw* ('who cooks for you, who cooks for you all') call, ending with a descending and rolling *hooaaaw* note.

Threats

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), barred owls are not threatened and classified as a species of "least concern" regarding conservation efforts, as their population is on the rise. Regarding natural predators, the great horned owl is the most serious predatory threat to the barred owl. Although they often live in the same areas, the barred owl will avoid parts of its territory occupied by a great horned owl. Barred owls also are vulnerable to attack when on the ground by fox and coyotes. Human activity is also a threat to barred owls, as urban development and logging are compromising the old growth forest these birds require for survival.

Conclusion

Barred owls are skilled hunters who rely on North America's forests and swamps for both food and shelter. They do not build nests, but instead use cavities in old trees, or the abandoned nests of other animals. While this species is not threatened, and has few natural predators, ongoing human development of barred owl habitat could one day threaten these amazing birds.

Other Interesting Facts

--- Barred owl feathers weigh more than their entire skeleton. Bird skeletons are strong but very lightweight.

--- A barred owl's hearing is so acute that they are capable of detecting a mouse's heartbeat. They can also move about their facial feathers to more accurately send sound waves toward their ear slits.

--- Owls have 14 neck bones for unparalleled flexibility.

Bibliography

Bird, David M., ed., *Birds of Canada*. Toronto: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2010.

Cannings, Richard, Tom Aversa, and Hal Opperman. *Birds of Southwestern British Columbia*. Surrey, B.C.: Heritage House, 2005.

Lewis, Dean P. <http://www.owlpages.com/owls.php?genus=Strix&species=varia>

Long, Kim. *Owls: A Wildlife Handbook*. Boulder, Colorado: Johnson Books, 1998.

Sibley, David Allen. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Chanticleer Press, Inc., 2000.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology. http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Barred_Owl/lifehistory
www.fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology/barred_owl.htm

Images (in order of appearance)

Barred Owl Image, Steve Sleep.
<http://www.owling.com/barrd11.htm>

Great Horned Owl photo by Darren Colello.

<http://www.wildlifephotos.ca>

Spotted Owl image, public domain.

<http://byways.org/explore/byways/50186/photos.html?id=59174>

Barred Owl Distribution Map, created by Dean P. Lewis

<http://www.owlpages.com/owls.php?genus=Strix&species=varia>