



Barred Owl

Strix varia

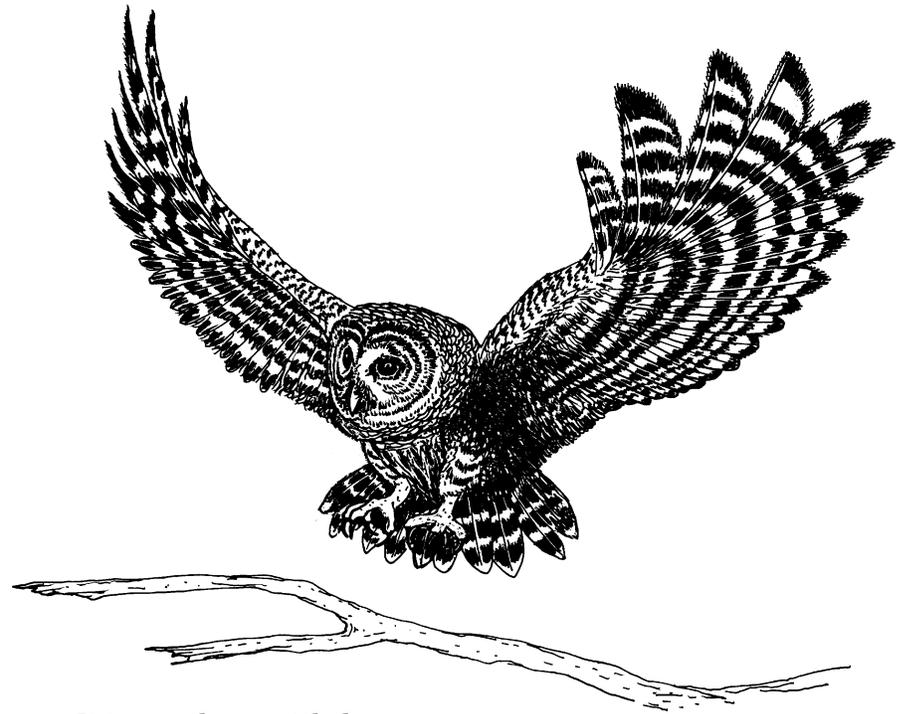
This large, fairly common owl has an admirable vocabulary of hoots and wails, which it willingly uses throughout the large tracts of woods still found in North Carolina. Often heard during daylight hours on overcast days, its vocalizations have given rise to one of its local names, "eight-hooter." Ornithologists recognize two subspecies of this bird in North Carolina by the pitch of their hooting, with barred owls from the Piedmont and Coastal Plain having lower-pitched voices than those from the Mountains. Its closest kin is the now-infamous spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis*) of western North America.

History and Status

The horizontal barring on the breast is the source of its name. This owl, nearly as large as the great horned owl, lacks the ear tufts, glaring yellow eyes and formidable appearance of the latter species. The barred owl prefers wetter, riverine areas, while the horned owl is more at home along the ridges and drier areas of the state. The barred owl appears to be rather tolerant of people and, at least in Wake County, has increased in numbers where recent subdivisions have caused great horned owls to abandon some of their nesting areas. The barred owl is found throughout North Carolina.

Description

Exceeded in size only by the great horned owl, the barred owl is much less dramatic in appear-



ance. It is a rather mottled grayish brown with light and dark horizontal barring on the breast. Each belly and flank feather is buffy white with a central chocolate-brown stripe, creating a pattern of irregular vertical stripes down the front of the bird. The large eyes are a liquid dark brownish black, set in a puffy, large, round head. There are no plumage variations between the sexes. And, characteristic of the raptor group, the female is noticeably larger than her mate.

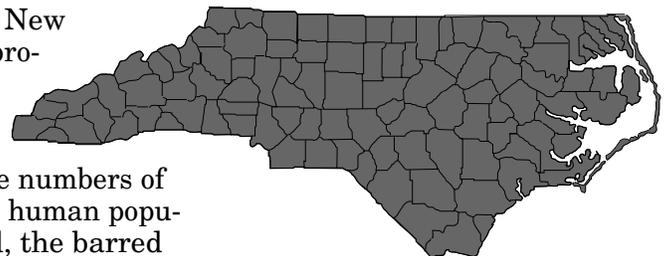
Habitat and Habits

Before the extensive lumbering of the Piedmont and Coastal Plain of North Carolina, the barred owl frequented the huge, uninterrupted forests, where streams or floodplains were a significant portion of the forest floor. At higher elevations, waterways and drainages such as the French Broad and New rivers provided appropriate habitat. Habitat loss and alteration have sharply reduced the numbers of this species. As the human population has spiraled, the barred owl's populations have fallen. Megafarms, expressways, hous-

ing subdivisions and shopping centers now stand where forest habitat used to be.

The barred owl enjoys an appetite for a wide range of food items. It is capable of capturing and killing mammal species as large as an opossum. Smaller mammals such as rabbits, squirrels and any smaller rodents are fair game. Salamanders, frogs, fish, crayfish, beetles and other insects are often consumed. This bird is known to prey upon a variety of bird species and has even been known to kill and eat screech owls! Most small prey is swallowed whole, headfirst; larger animals are eaten where they are captured rather than being carried in the owl's talons to another site for consumption.

The breeding season begins in late winter in North Carolina.



Range Map:
Found statewide

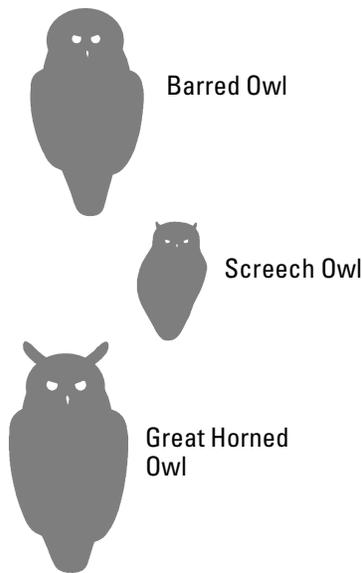
This is preceded by a very vocal courtship period. Clearly, this reticent owl species becomes vocally extroverted during the long nights of winter, while courting and establishing a breeding territory. The preferred nest site is a cavity in a tree, living or dead, of sufficient size to accommodate the incubating adult. Two white, nearly round eggs are the normal clutch size. Four weeks of incubation are required for development of the embryo.

The newly hatched young are blind and helpless and must be brooded most of the time by one of the adults to maintain body temperature. For the first couple of weeks the parents must render food into very small portions for the small owlets. As they grow downy plumage and increase in strength, the young owls rapidly gain some independence in eating. Between the fourth and sixth weeks, the young birds abandon their nest cavity as they increase in size and clamber around in trees, long before they are able to fly skillfully. This is a period when the young owls are gaining muscle mass and coordination as well as adult plumage. If they survive, the juveniles will be flying by midsummer. However, their skills at catching and killing prey are minimal and they are attended by their parents for several more weeks before actually gaining independence. Only one brood is reared each year.

Range and Distribution

The barred owl is found throughout North Carolina. Numbers vary with available suitable habitat. The drainages of the larger streams, such as the French Broad, Roanoke, Neuse and Cape Fear rivers, no doubt provide ideal cover and food items for this bird. Interestingly, it seems to use the same habitat as the red-shouldered hawk; one patrols the area by day, the other by night.

The North American range of



this species extends from Newfoundland, southern Quebec, and Saskatchewan south to Texas and Florida. It is migratory only in the northernmost part of its range, where severe winter weather often makes food procurement impossible.

People Interactions

As a native bird species, the barred owl is protected. Its serves a valuable role in aiding in the control of rodent populations.

References

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 Pearson, T. Gilbert, C. S. Brimley and H. H. Brimley. *Birds of North Carolina* (Raleigh: N.C. Dept. of Agriculture, 1942).
 Potter, Eloise, James F. Parnell and Robert Teulings. *Birds of the Carolinas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Credits

Written by Wayne Irvin.
 Illustrated by J. T. Newman.
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BARRED OWL

Classification

Class: Aves
 Order: Strigiformes

Average Size

Length: 18 to 20 in.
 Wingspan: 42 to 44 in.
 Weight: 14 to 17 oz.

Food

Mammals, especially small rodents, frogs, fishes, salamanders, crayfish, beetles, crickets. Occasionally takes birds as big as crows or grouse.

Breeding

The barred owl is monogamous. In North Carolina, breeding activity begins in midwinter with an interlude of vocalizations as the pair bond is strengthened and a nest site selected. The normal clutch size is 2 white eggs, almost round in shape, resembling ping-pong balls. Four weeks of incubation are required for hatching.

Young

As with many other bird species, newly hatched owls are completely helpless and unable to maintain their body temperature without almost constant brooding by a parent. After the young are fully feathered, they remain dependent upon their parents, well into the summer, for food and help in developing skill in acquiring their own food. With young that mature so slowly, only one brood annually is possible.