

Barred Owl

Scientific Name: *Strix varia*



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Introduction

Owls of all kinds have been traditionally associated with a variety of myths and tales usually involving witchcraft, magic, evil occurrences, and impending death —many people believe that an owl hooting near a house means that an occupant will die soon. None of these incidents have any basis in fact, but traditions die hard and so for many the night call or flight of an owl can raise a chill.

The mystery and supernatural influences associated with owls can, in part, be attributed to their calls and appearance. The barred owl is a likely candidate if you have ever heard an owl call in the middle of the night. It has a distinctive call that can come in measures of eight and would resemble the human phrase “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?” It has large eyes, an attribute that makes many believe it is wise or knowing. In reality, owls are efficient, specialized predators that have a significant role in the control of a variety of rodents and to a lesser extent insects; its unusual physical makeup contributes to this ability.

Its large, brown eyes (most owls have yellow eyes) allow the barred owl to gather enough light to permit it to see well and function effectively in low light conditions. Its ear placement and acute hearing let the owl pinpoint minute sounds from a prey source and capture it in total darkness. Additionally, the feathers of an owl are fringed on the edges, helping to make their flight virtually silent; essentially, prey have no indication of an owl in their midst.

Description

Barred owls are the most common large owl found in southeastern Ohio. The widest distribution of barred owls occurs in the eastern half of the state; sightings occur in western Ohio, but they are rare. Its range across North America is vast. It can be found across southern Canada, south through Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida. Their range continues into the mountainous parts of Mexico and Central America. Recent expansion of barred owl range into the Pacific Northwest has occurred as a result of the timber management practices implemented there.

Breeding populations of barred owls are thought to occur in 83 of the state’s 88 counties. Barred owls are rare around larger metropolitan areas, having been replaced by the more adaptable and aggressive great horned owl. A barred owl’s home range is relatively constant throughout the year; however, the range can change based on the availability of prey species populations. In a study conducted in Minnesota, home range was determined to average about 565 acres.

The barred owl is a brown-gray hornless (no ear tufts) owl with white spots on the back, white streaks on the belly that run lengthwise, and the white bars, from which their name is derived, on the neck and breast that run crosswise. As stated previously, its eyes are brown rather than the more common yellow. The barred owl stands 18 to 22 inches tall and has a wingspan of 3.5 to 4 feet.

Habitat and Habits

Mice are the barred owl's preferred food, but they will also consume a wide variety of birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, and insects. Owls, like snakes, swallow their prey whole. Indigestible parts such as bones, fur, and feathers are regurgitated as pellets. Owl pellets can be used to study the bird's diet habits. One prey list developed from an analysis of stomach contents included meadow voles, mice, chipmunks, squirrels, snails, slugs, spiders, bats, chickens, various songbirds, woodpeckers, crows, a variety of insects, crayfish, and rabbits. In Ohio, meadow voles, short-tailed shrews, and white-footed mice comprise the bulk of the barred owl's prey.

Generally, these owls live in larger tracts of deciduous forests, ranging from mesic, or wet areas such as wooded swamps, poorly drained woodlots, and protected hillsides to drier, upland area. Recent research indicates that the preference for wetter sites is because these are areas less likely to have been disturbed, particularly by timber activities that remove the mature, deteriorating trees used for nesting sites, rather than a need for water. The presence of a suitable number of mature trees capable of providing perching and nesting cover are crucial for barred owl habitat. Pine groves are frequently used as roosting cover for this species which overwinters in Ohio.

Reproduction and Care of Young

As is typical of other owl species, barred owls rarely build their own nests. Instead they will frequently use hollow tree cavities; old hawk, squirrel, and crow nests; and on occasion man-made nesting structures. Although it could not be considered typical nesting behavior, barred owls have been observed sharing a nest and incubation responsibilities with hawks, with young of both species hatching. Nests built by barred owls alone are flimsy and poorly constructed; eggs deposited in owl-constructed nests frequently roll out, breaking on impact.

When a successful mating occurs, clutches of two or three eggs, and on occasion four, are laid in March. Incubation requires about 28 days and will begin, for each individual egg, once it is laid. Thus, hatching dates within a clutch are staggered. Eggs will hatch about late March into mid-April. The eggs are a dull white with a slightly roughened surface.

Owlets will open their eyes at one week of age and leave the nest cavity at about 30 days of age, but are not fledged (able to fly) until seven to nine weeks of age. After they leave the nest cavity, the young will typically roost on a tree branch, which is oftentimes reached by climbing, until they can fly. The young barred owl climbs trees by grasping the bark of the tree with its beak and talons, flapping its wings

then letting go with the beak, quickly stretching its neck out and grabbing onto the bark with its beak again, and pulling and/or walking itself up the tree.

Management Plans

Current barred owl populations within the state appear stable. The Division of Wildlife has no active management plan designed for these owls, but continues to monitor and evaluate information, as it becomes available, to help ensure that they remain a viable component of the forest ecosystem.

The owls of Ohio are a featured topic of many Division information and education efforts. Project WILD, a curriculum for grade school children, has segments dedicated to teaching students about owls. Participants of the Division's Becoming an Outdoors-Woman workshop have the opportunity to take an "owl prowl," a chance to listen for and identify the signs of owls in the area.

Viewing Opportunities

Viewing opportunities are best in the intensively forested southeastern section of the state where the barred owl is most abundant. Because they are primarily nocturnal, the likelihood of hearing a barred owl is much greater than actually seeing one. However they can be lured into viewing range by individuals proficient enough to mimic their "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?" call.

Do Something Wild!

The barred owl is among the majority of wildlife species in Ohio that are not hunted. All of these animals are vital parts of our overall ecosystem and contribute to the wildlife diversity in the state. Helping us manage and research these species are the generous citizens of the state of Ohio. With money they either donated through the state income tax check-off, by the purchase of a wildlife license plate, or their direct contribution to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to purchase critical habitat essential to sustaining populations of barred owls and other species of wildlife.

Contributions to our Wildlife Diversity Program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to: Endangered Species Special Account, Ohio Division of Wildlife, 2045 Morse Road, Bldg. G, Columbus, Ohio 43229-6693. All contributions, whether made on your income tax return or directly, are tax deductible.



At a Glance

Mating: Monogamous

Peak Breeding Activity: Late February through mid-March

Incubation: 28 days. Incubation begins as soon as the first egg is laid and ends 28 days after the last egg is laid.

Young Hatch: Generally in mid-April

Clutch Size: 2-3 eggs

Adult Height: 18-22 inches

Life Expectancy: Not available

Migration Patterns: In the extreme northern portions of its range a shortage of prey species, generally occurring in the winter, will result in the owl moving from those areas to more productive hunting grounds. Provided food supplies are available, barred owl migration is minimal.

Feeding Periods: The barred owl is a nocturnal species, meaning most of its actions including feeding occur at night. Some daytime activity has been reported, but it is rare.

Typical Foods: Although mice are the barred owl's preferred food, they consume a wide variety of small mammals, reptiles, fish, and insects including snails, slugs, spiders, bats, chicken, various songbirds, woodpeckers, crows, crayfish, and rabbits. In Ohio, meadow voles, short-tailed shrews, and white-footed mice comprise the bulk of the barred owl's prey.

Native to Ohio: Yes

Active or Potential Nuisance Species: No. They are extremely effective and efficient predators that feed primarily on small rodents.

The barred owl is classified as a species of special interest in Ohio. This means that it might become threatened in the state if placed under increased stress. Special interest also indicates a species for which there is insufficient information to properly evaluate its status.