

Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Barred Owl (*Strix varia*)



The barred owl is a large bird, up to 20 inches long, with a wingspan of 44 inches. It is gray-brown in color, with whitish streaks on the back and head, brown horizontal bars on its white chest, and vertical bars on its belly. This owl has a round face without ear tufts, and a whitish facial disk with dark concentric rings around brown eyes. Males and females look similar, but females can weigh about one third more than males.

“Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?” This is the familiar call of the barred owl defending its territory or attracting a mate. If you live in or near a heavily wooded area with mature forest, particularly if there is also a stream or other body of water nearby, this sound is probably familiar. Barred owls are the most vocal of our owls, and most often are heard calling early at night and at dawn. They call year-round, but courtship activities begin in February and breeding takes place primarily in March and April. Nesting in cavities or abandoned hawk, squirrel, or crow nests, the female sits on a nest of 1-5 eggs for 28 to 33 days. During this time, the male brings food to her. Once the eggs have hatched, both parents care for the fledglings for at least 4 months. Barred owls mate for life, reuse their nest site for many years, and maintain territories from 200 – 400 acres in size.

Barred owls are strongly territorial and remain in their territories for most, if not all, of the year. However, in times when food is scarce, these birds have been known to wander in search of prey. Barred owls are opportunistic predators, eating small mammals and rabbits, birds up to the size of grouse, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates, including crayfish. They sit and wait on an elevated perch, scanning the area for prey, then swoop down silently and grasp their prey with their talons. An owl’s stomach absorbs the nutritious parts of its prey and regurgitates the indigestible matter (hair, feathers, bones, claws, insect chitin) as round pellets about seven hours later. These owl “pellets” can be found on the ground under roosts, and dissecting these pellets is a fun way to learn about an owl’s diet.

Barred owls prefer large, unfragmented blocks of forest. They are most often associated with mature and old growth forests of mixed hardwoods and conifers due to a greater availability of potential nest sites. In addition, mature forests have a lower density of branches in the lower levels of the forest, which may make hunting easier. A closed canopy also provides protection from the elements and from mobbing by other birds.

If you are a landowner hoping to encourage or maintain barred owls on your property, characteristics to pay close attention to are the size (number of acres) of forest, the age or maturity of the forest, and the number of large diameter snags or cavity trees available for nesting. Barred owls are seldom present in areas with tens of acres of forest, but are common in forests that are hundreds or thousands of acres in size. Therefore, if you live in a region with small patches of forest, it is unlikely that you will be able to attract barred owls to your land. However, in heavily forested regions, you can encourage barred owls by maintaining mature forest stands with two or more trees per acre 20 inches in diameter or larger to allow for the development of cavity trees or snags (dead trees) suitable for nesting. You may also help create a snag or two by girdling a couple of large, live trees. Leaving dead wood on the ground can also enhance habitat by providing cover for amphibians, reptiles, and small mammals that in turn provide food for barred owls. By focusing on just a few habitat elements, you can continue to enjoy the characteristic sounds of the big woods. To hear the call of the barred owl, visit http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Barred_Owl.html

Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at www.arnotconservation.info

Barred owl photo courtesy of
John Blenis © 2006 & [CalPhotos](#), University of California, Berkeley