

Barred Owl *Strix varia*



Folk Name: Hooting Owl, Laughing Owl

Status: Resident

Abundance: Fairly Common

Habitat: Moist riparian forests and urban and suburban bottomland forests

The Barred Owl is perhaps our best known and most common owl. It resides in both mature urban forests and riparian and bottomland forests. It is a little smaller than the Great Horned Owl, and the Barred Owl is occasionally one of this big owl's prey. The Barred Owl has a rounded head with no ear tufts. It is dark brown overall with streaks and barring of white and yellowish-brown. It is our only "dark-eyed" forest owl. When seen in good light, their big, round, black eyes look to be a deep, dark blue. This owl's loud *Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you...aaalll?* call resonates in forested backyards and forests throughout the region. In addition to this characteristic "hoot owl" call, the Barred Owl is known to make a wide variety of noises throughout the year, some of which sound like caterwauling monkeys.

"The hoots and screams of this bird are the most weird sounds imaginable, and we are not surprised at the stories of faint-hearted travelers being driven from their camps by these ghost-like serenaders. Besides their usual cry of 'Who, who, who!' which may be heard for half a mile, they have a number of shrieks and laughs and screams which they seem to use only on special occasions when meeting old acquaintances, or possibly when engaged in a war of words with a rival hunter



Barred Owl in urban Charlotte. (Jarrett Wyant)



caught trespassing on their dominions. Only persons who live near deep forests hear the call of this strange hermit of the somber woods."

—Webb's *Our Bird Book*, 1917

Since the 1800s, the Barred Owl has been designated a rather common bird in the Carolina Piedmont. However, today it may be more common in much of the region, including in cities and towns, than it was a century ago. For over a hundred years, agriculture, especially cotton farming, was the main industry across the South. Much of the forest habitat had been cleared, displacing the Barred Owls in the process. As agriculture declined in importance, forests slowly matured and become prominent in many locations once again. Also over the past century, trees planted in cities and suburbs have matured, resulting in an "old-growth" like canopy in many areas, especially in Charlotte which has been dubbed the "City of Trees." This "old-growth" forest of mature, large-diameter trees with an open understory provides the perfect habitat for the Barred Owl. Owl researcher Dr. Bierregaard recently joked they "are so common now that you can't swing a dead rat in suburban Charlotte without hitting a Barred Owl, and if you don't hit one, one will probably fly by and snatch it out of your hand."

From the 1950s through today, many residents of our towns and cities have reported encounters with Barred Owls. On October 12, 1956, Joe and Becky Norwood were "surprised" to hear an owl hooting in their neighborhood in southeast Charlotte:

I was in our backyard and from habit gave a perfunctory “squeak” or two. To my amazement a large ghostly shape came winging low toward me and then veered sharply away to a nearby pine tree. I hastened into the house to get Mrs. Norwood and a flashlight. Returning to the yard I again ‘squeaked’ and this time the owl obligingly flew almost over our heads and came to rest in a dead sweet gum tree about ten feet from us. Shining the flashlight on it we saw that it was a Barred Owl. For several moments it peered curiously down at us while we peered curiously up at it. The owl then took off over the house to another tree. A third “squeak” brought it over once more but by this time it had apparently

learned that I was no mouse as it responded no more. It is encouraging to know that even in a built up residential area in this “metropolis” of the two Carolinas one can still see something besides the everyday yard and garden birds.

The Carolina Raptor Center received over 3,200 Barred Owls in the 35-year period between 1980 and 2015, or over 90 per year on average. This is twice the number of Great Horned Owls they treated during that time. Causes of injury were similar to those listed in the species account for the Great Horned Owl, but in this case, we can replace “trapped in chicken coop” with “trapped in chimney.” These cavity-nesting birds often get into chimneys or

(Photo courtesy of Rob Bierregaard)

Spotlight on Local Research: Barred Owl Nesting

We may have more information about the breeding and diet of Barred Owls in the Piedmont than any other species of bird. This is thanks to Dr. Richard O. Bierregaard and his graduate students at UNC Charlotte, who conducted a series of research studies on Barred Owls in Mecklenburg County. They monitored over 200 nest attempts by 78 different pairs, tracked their movements, and examined their diet. It is believed that together, this represents the largest research study of Barred Owls ever conducted. Fortunately, Dr. Bierregaard was kind enough to share his data with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas project.

Graduate student Eric S. Harrold conducted one part of the study looking at the habitat use and home range size of this owl. He determined Barred Owls do well at both urban and rural nest sites, and they are not impacted by regular human activity. He found that at 200 acres, the urban home range was smaller than expected, possibly because prey species were more concentrated, and the very open understory of the suburban habitat provides these owls an ideal situation to sit and watch for the movement of prey. Another student, Cori Cauble, determined Barred Owls in the suburban Charlotte region rely on a greater percentage of birds (>50%) in their diet than do owls studied anywhere else, including the rural areas of Mecklenburg County. This is likely due in part to the larger number of birds present because of higher numbers of bird feeders and gardens planted for songbirds, but especially due to the very open understory, which provides fewer safe locations for small birds to roost during the night.

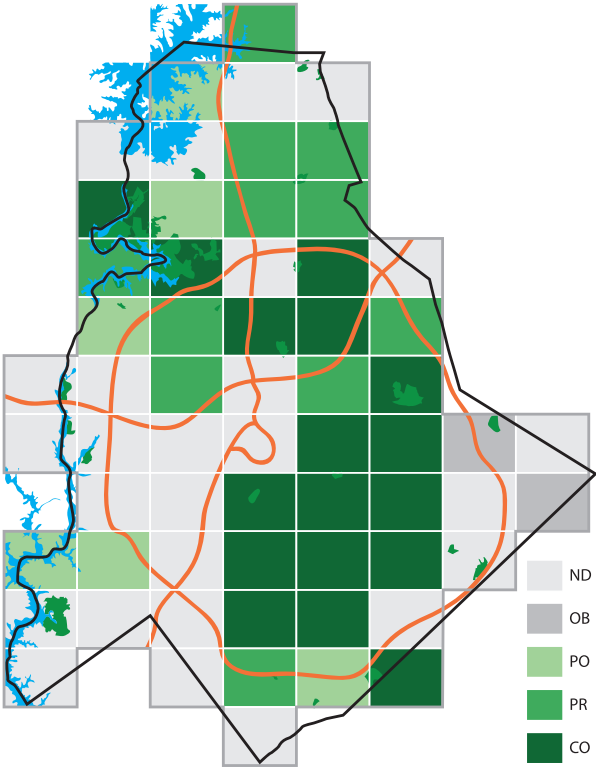


Bierregaard was pleased with the response to the study from the public as many people in various parts of the county reported nesting pairs for his team to investigate, graciously letting him and his students traipse through their yards at night, and set up nest box video recording stations in their homes. Two outcomes of the overall study were the understanding that urban Barred Owls effectively reproduce with a net increase in population and that cars and disease are the most common causes of their death. For more details on Barred Owl ecology and nesting phenology in this region, check out:

http://www.ospreytrax.com/Osprey_Migration/barred_owls.htm

other dark, building cavities and inadvertently cause problems for unsuspecting homeowners. One found in a local chimney in 1999 was banded and released. The same owl was found 500 feet from there almost 19 years later.

Note: Thanks to Dr. R.O. Bierregaard formerly at UNC Charlotte, who shared nest location data from his research studies. His studies showed that there are approximately 2 pairs per square mile throughout the older suburbs surrounding uptown Charlotte.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Fairly Widespread (PR/11, CO/17)