



Barred Owl

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Jennifer Rowe

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. Most active at night but often heard during daylight hours on overcast days, barred owls get one of their local names, “eight-hooter,” from their vocalizations. 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.

Description

Exceeded in size only by the great horned owl, the barred owl gets its name from the horizontal barring on its throat and upper breast, contrasting with a pattern of irregular bold, vertical streaks just below. It is a rather mottled grayish brown overall with light and dark feathers throughout its body. The large eyes are dark-brownish black, and set in a large, round head that lacks ear tufts. There are no plumage variations between the sexes. And, characteristic of the raptor group, the female is noticeably larger than her mate.

History and Status

Despite the extensive lumbering of eastern forests following European colonization, Breeding Bird Survey data suggest that barred owl populations in North Carolina have generally increased since 1966. This success may be due to the prevalence of beaver ponds and changes with forest management in some areas, including lengthening of timber rotations, reduced habitat fragmentation, and retention of standing dead trees. Learn more at ncwildlife.org/barred-owl.

Habitats & Habits

The barred owl prefers wetter, riverine areas, whereas the great-horned owl is more at home along the ridges and drier areas of the state. At higher elevations, waterways and drainages such as the French Broad and New rivers provided appropriate habitat. Barred owls nest and forage primarily in wetlands, such as around beaver ponds and in open swamps, bottomlands, and nearby marshes. While the species is found statewide, they are relatively scarce in the mountains. The barred owl is an opportunistic eater with an appetite for a wide range of food items. It can capture and kill mammals as large as an opossum, but will also consume smaller animals such as rabbits, squirrels, rodents, salamanders, frogs, fish, crayfish, beetles and other insects. They will also hunt a variety of bird species and have even been known to kill and eat screech owls. Most small prey is swallowed whole, headfirst;

The barred owl is named for the horizontal barring on its throat and upper breast.



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Range and Distribution

The barred owl is found throughout North Carolina. Numbers vary with available suitable habitat. 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 finding food impossible.

Range Map



■ Barred Owl Range Map

Barred Owl

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larger animals are eaten where they are captured rather than being carried in the owl's talons to another site for consumption. Barred owls are prey themselves and are frequently killed by great horned owls and large mammals, especially raccoons.

This owl is monogamous and strongly territorial, especially during the breeding season, which begins in late winter in North Carolina, and is preceded by a very vocal courtship period. The preferred nest site is a cavity in a tree, living or dead, of sufficient size to accommodate the incubating adult. Females can lay 1-5 white eggs, but usually only 2, that are incubated solely by the female. A month later, the newly hatched young are blind and helpless and must be provided food and brooded to maintain their body temperature during the colder winter months. Before they can take flight, juveniles may climb trees using their beaks and talons but will eventually fledge and leave their nest 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. Barred owls only rear one brood each year.

Human Interactions

The barred owl appears to be rather tolerant of people and has been documented nesting in wooded, suburban areas. Under federal and state law, it is illegal for anyone to injure, harass, kill or possess a barred owl or any bird of prey or any parts of a bird of prey. This includes harming or removing a nest. If you find an injured owl, contact a [licensed wildlife rehabilitator](#).

References/More Information

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Credits

Written by Wayne Irvin, updated by John Carpenter, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (2018)

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Strigiformes

Average Size

Length: 17 to 20 inches

Wingspan: 42 to 44 inches

Weight: 17 to 30 ounces

Food

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

Breeding/Young

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, resembling ping-pong balls. Eggs hatch in about 4 weeks. Newly hatched owls are completely helpless and unable to maintain their body temperature without almost constant brooding by a parent.

Life Expectancy

Long-lived. Up to 18 years in the wild; 23 in captivity.



Peter K. Burian