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Lucky owlers may spot the stunning great gray owl – but only in rare years when prey is sparse in its Arctic habitat.

OWLS *of* NEW HAMPSHIRE

Remarkable birds of prey take shelter in our winter woods

Owls hold a special place in human culture and folklore. The image of the wise old owl pervades our literature and conjures up childhood memories of bedtime stories. Perhaps it's their circular faces and big eyes that promote those anthropomorphic analogies, or maybe it is owls' generally nocturnal habits that give them an air of mystery and fascination.

New Hampshire's woods and swamps are home to several species of owls. Four owl species regularly nest here: great horned, barred, Eastern screech and Northern saw-whet. One other species, the long-eared owl, nests sporadically in the northern part of the state. None of these species is rare enough to be listed in the N.H. Wildlife Action Plan, which is good. In general, habitat protection has the potential to benefit owls and many other kinds of wildlife, which fits nicely with one of the plan's goals of keeping common species common.

In the winter, we can have an influx of additional species from the high Arctic and subarctic boreal regions. In most years, we see snowy owls and short-eared owls, and every once in a while – when Arctic rodent populations plummet – great gray, boreal and Northern hawk owls visit, sending local birders into an excited frenzy.

Winter is also when owls nest, so it is a great time of year to go owl watching. On a full moon night, go out to a nearby woods and listen. The pairs will call back and forth, and if you can learn to imitate their calls, they might just answer you! Once you hear an owl, move quietly nearer. Some people like to bring a flashlight to shine on the owl, but first get your eyes accustomed to the dark so you will see their shape perched in a tree. Then use the light – but only for a moment; those owls have nests to care for!

OWLETS IN THE ROOKERY?

Owls generally begin their breeding cycle very early in the year, long before spring reclaims the landscape from the winter freeze. Great horned are the first to breed in New Hampshire. By late January, they are already pairing up and proclaiming their territories with deep five-note hoots. Both the male and female call. If they call at the same time, you can detect that the male's hoot is lower in pitch than the female's.

The great horned owl gets its name from the prominent tufts of feathers – often called ear tufts – on the top of its head. The tufts have nothing to do with hearing; they are used for threat and posture. Their plumage is a rich tapestry of brown and chestnut, with

bright yellow and black eyes surrounded by an orange facial disc and a white throat patch.

Like most owls, great horned owls are not big on building their own nests. They usually claim an old stick nest of another species – perhaps one originally built by a crow, raven or red-tailed hawk. In

New Hampshire, great horned owls favor nesting in great blue heron nests in beaver-swamp rookeries. Many times, while checking rookeries in early spring, I'll see the telltale feather

tufts sticking up over the edge of a nest right in the middle of all the herons. Later in the spring, I'll return and see a big fluffy owlet – while the herons are still incubating eggs in their nests.

The timing of nesting is correlated to maximum food availability for the chicks as they approach fledging. Great horned owls have a varied diet that includes rats, mice, flying squirrels and mammals as large as skunks. They will also eat birds on occasion, although apparently not heron chicks. In all the times I have seen them nesting in rookeries, I have not observed any adverse affect on the surrounding heron breeding success.

SILENCE OF THE FROGS

Our most common and widespread owl is the barred owl. Their “who cooks for you, who cooks for you all” calls are probably familiar to most. The barred is a little smaller than the great horned and is a uniform gray color with

The great horned owl's mottled coloring is excellent camouflage against tree bark.



BY IAIN MACLEOD



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SURVIVING A TOUGH WINTER

The winter of 2007-2008 was very harsh for barred owls in New Hampshire. The incredible snow amounts made hunting very challenging, and all across the state, hundreds of dead owls were found. Many were emaciated; lots were hit by vehicles along roadways – likely because the plowed edges of the roads were enticing to hunting owls. All across the region, there were reports of barred owls hunting in the daytime – a sure sign of food stress and changes in prey availability.

Many of these owls would be seen perched near bird feeders in back yards. These owls were not hunting for the birds, but hoping that a red squirrel or mouse would reveal itself at the base of the feeders. Sometimes these owls would sit patiently for hours at a time, desperate for a meal. I heard reports of them dropping dead off their perches, finally succumbing to starvation.

Most of these starving owls were youngsters that moved south en masse out of Ontario, spreading throughout New England in search of food. These Canadian interlopers were forced into less than optimal hunting grounds – all the good territories being filled with resident barred owls.

Several people asked me last winter if there was anything they could do for the owls. I suggested clearing an area of snow around the bird feeders, so that any small mammals coming to the feeders to eat spilled seed would have to stray out into the open and be easier to catch. It is important to remember that during any winter, the mortality rate of first-year barred owls – and all birds, for that matter – is very high. Subsequent winters are not likely to be so harsh, so this one hard winter would not have impacted the overall population of barred owls. ~ I.M.

Last winter's extreme weather was a cruel challenge for some visiting barred owls, hundreds of which died of starvation.

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darker barring on its upper chest and streaks on the belly. The barred owl lacks ear tufts and its eyes are dark brown.

The barred owl is found throughout the state, although it is less common in the far north. In New Hampshire it is primarily a cavity nester, finding the rotted-out trunk of an old maple tree ideal. The barred does not nest quite as early as the great horned owl, but certainly by March is well into its breeding cycle. That's when the barred owl is at its noisiest. Night after night, you can hear its monkey-like laughing as it squares off with rivals and courts in the forest.

Barred owls often nest near maple and beaver swamps. The wetlands provide a rich diversity of prey, which includes many amphibians in the spring and summer months. I discovered first-hand the fondness that barred owls have for wood frogs one spring several years ago. I had pondered for some time the reason for the sudden coordinated silences in mid-chorus of an entire pond of courting wood frogs. It was as if all of a sudden someone turned off a switch and they all shut up. I tucked myself into the shore of the pond as dusk approached and waited. The frog chorus was deafening. All of a sudden, a movement caught my eye, and a barred owl flew in to a dead snag in the middle of the pond. Every frog in the pond immediately stopped calling – total silence. The owl flew to the far shore and vanished into the woods. After a couple minutes the chorus resumed. Ten minutes later the owl was back – perhaps it wasn't quite dark enough the first time – and the sound switched off again. Every spring since, when I listen to the wood frog chorus, I assume that these intermittent silences are caused by a hunting barred owl or other predator moving into position to catch supper.

The prey of barred owls also includes smaller species of owls – particularly the Northern saw-whet

owl, which is only about the size of a soda can. There have been many documented occurrences of saw-whet feathers being found in barred owl pellets and nests. On at least two occasions, while attempting to verify the presence of a saw-whet using a taped call or whistle, I have attracted the attention of a barred owl. Last winter, one barred owl almost landed on my head while I whistled for a saw-whet on my deck in Ashland.

TOOTS FROM OUR TINIEST OWLS

The Northern saw-whet owl got its wonderful name because early colonial settlers decided that its call sounded like a wood saw being sharpened on a whetstone. I have only heard a real saw being “whetted” a couple of times, and it’s a very appropriate comparison. The saw-whet’s song is much more commonly heard – a monotonous series of one-note toots which sound remarkably like the warning sound of a large piece of construction equipment backing up. Perhaps if it were named more recently, it might be called the Northern fork-lift owl. I much prefer saw-whet!

The saw-whet owl is highly migratory and large numbers pass through New Hampshire, streaming out of the boreal forest to winter in southern states. Bird-banding stations band more migrating saw-whets in North America than any other owl. The saw-whet is more common in our northern forests but is present in most wooded areas of the state. March to May is the best time to hear their toots, but occasionally in the fall they will resume their calling.

Saw-whets nest in the abandoned nesting holes of pileated woodpeckers and Northern flickers, so are very hard to detect during the nesting season. They will quite readily use man-made nesting boxes if they

are properly designed and installed. They prey on small mammals, insects, worms and even small birds, which they will pluck from branches as they roost.

One of my most memorable encounters with a saw-whet happened in March a few years ago, when someone noticed a “small owl” sleeping above a door in an alley one block from Main Street in Concord. I went over to check it out, and sure enough, there was a saw-whet owl asleep, perched on a short piece of conduit, right above a door in a busy alleyway. People and dogs and trucks were passing by within a couple feet and the bird did not move. It was remarkable how well its rusty red plumage blended with the red brick of the alley wall. Normally the owl would have perched close to the trunk of a live conifer for camouflage, but I suspect that it was migrating at night and as dawn approached it found itself in the city and saw the brick wall as a safe place to “vanish” for the day while it slept. As dusk fell, the saw-whet awoke, shook his feathers and fluttered off into the twilight – a truly wonderful encounter with a special little bird.



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The author photographed this pint-sized saw-whet owl snoozing in a Concord alleyway.

HAWK OWL



BOREAL OWL



SHORT-EARED OWL



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