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Barred Owl Nest

Leonard J. Soucy, Jr.

A successful Northern Barred Owl (*Strix varia varia*) nesting took place this year in central New Jersey. Conveniently for me, the birds nested in a tree cavity on my property border, so observation was quite extensive and easy.

My home is located on the southwestern edge of the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Morris County, N.J. The 6000-acre refuge is skirted by the Passaic River on the west and south, and surrounded by hills 50 to 200 feet high, creating a shallow bowl. The swamp is actually a series of individual marshes and swamps interspersed with low lying ridges or hummocks.

Typical plants of the marsh areas are Cattail, Buttonbush, and sedges while swamp areas contain shrubs and trees such as Highbush Blueberry, Azalea, Willow, Red Maple, and Elm. On the ridges and hummocks grow Beech, Oak, Birch and Maple. This is ideal habitat for the Barred Owl.

The nest tree was a huge, dead White Oak on the bank of a small brook. During a storm this past fall, a large limb broke off leaving a rather sheltered cavity facing the water. The birds found and occupied this newly-created site the first year it existed. The tree is only 50 feet from a well travelled road. A steel bridge spans the brook and from this bridge the nest hole, 24 feet above ground, is plainly visible.

I first observed the birds in early March when both were extremely vocal and active during the day. We hear Barred Owls throughout the year in the swamp but this daytime vocalizing regular appearance in the same area started me in search of a nest.

Unlike observing a hawk, one is not aided in

locating a Barred Owl nest by the bird's frequent trips with nesting material. I thought the hole left by the broken-off limb was suitable for a nest but actually did not have my suspicion confirmed until late March when I saw the female sitting in the cavity. My best determination is that the eggs were laid the last week of March.

The calls of a courting pair of Barred Owls are thrilling to hear. Allen W. Eckert, in his new book, *The Owls of North America*, says they are "little short of spectacular" and "sounds that can best be described as uncouth"; I quite agree. Besides the familiar hooting some chuckling, cackling, squalling and caterwauling were common vocabulary of this pair.

During April the head of the parent bird was visible in the cavity as she incubated. Most of the emphatic vocalizing had now stopped. The male bird, upon arriving in the area, would announce his presence before flying to the nest with food. Later in May, when both adult birds were out of the nest, they would sit in a nearby tree and call, before flying to the nest to feed the young.

The incubating female would tolerate my approaching on the opposite bank of the brook to within 30 feet, without leaving the nest. Not wanting to jeopardize the nesting, I set up a zoom scope on my patio, a distance of only 100 yards, and did most of the observing from there.

The adult owls were diligent in their parental duties and, after brooding had stopped in mid-May, made numerous trips to the nest both day and night. At first they would enter the cavity itself, but I believe as the owlets grew there was not enough room for both chicks and parents. As soon as the owlets were big enough to be visible in the



nest opening, I never saw either adult bird in the nest again. Although they were observed carrying prey to the nest, it was difficult to identify the prey species. At least twice I could see that the owl was carrying a bird.

On June 6th, I climbed the tree and banded two healthy owlets, approximately 6 weeks old. They were both very much the same size, not aggressive and easily handled. The cavity measured 16 inches in diameter and was about 14 inches deep. In the bottom of the nest were wood chips and assorted debris. There were feather remains of a Common Grackle in the nest — nothing else — no pellets. Because the cavity faced the brook, I believe the pellets fell into the water, for I found none on the ground at the base of the tree.

After banding and photographing, I sprinkled moth flakes (Naphthalene) liberally around the tree and along the path taken from the bridge to the tree. This procedure has been found to deter mammalian predators from tracing human scent to the area. This was the only time I visited the nest.

One week later, I first observed one owlet on a branch outside the nest. This was at night. The next day I saw both chicks in the nest. The following night both owlets were out; one perched high atop a limb overhanging the brook. The beam from a 5-cell flashlight did not seem to bother them.

During this period of "branching," my wife first heard the sounds of the owlets. One night she came in from outdoors and told me she thought there was an injured animal in the yard and would I come have a look. We traced the sound to the nest tree and discovered an owlet sitting on a branch near the nest cavity. It was making a whistled-hissing sound, rather like whistling through clenched

teeth — very high-pitched and descending at the end. We had not heard this Barred Owl sound before. Even now at the time of this writing, the 4-month-old owlets are still "whistling through their teeth," not hooting.

I have read that young Barred Owls do not fly until 12 to 15 weeks old. I believe these birds were flying, at least short distances, at about 10 weeks. Many times short spans would be jumped or hopped; I saw them on both sides of the brook so they had to fly some distance over the water before they were 3 months old.

The young birds at 4 months are now almost identical in coloration and size to the adults. This makes visual separation difficult.

I hope the birds remain here through the winter. I must confess we are emotionally involved with this family. Mortality in the first year is very high in all birds, but now that this pair has fledged I feel hopeful for their future.

Unfortunately, Barred Owl populations in New Jersey are diminishing, habitat loss being one significant factor. The Great Swamp refuge affords some hope that this fascinating and useful bird will endure in our state.

References

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