

ABOUT THE COVER: BARRED OWL

To be walking through a forested swamp and have a Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) glide by on silent wings, or find one looking down at you through brown/black eyes, is an exciting moment for any bird enthusiast. The species name *varia* is Latin for variegated, and describes the brown-and-white plumage pattern of this common owl. The folknames "black-eyed owl," "bottom owl," and "swamp owl" tell us more about its appearance and habitat preference. This large, chunky, big-headed owl lacks "ears" of feather tufts, but has concentric rings of brown on its prominent facial discs. Its dark brown eyes contrast sharply with its bright yellow bill. It can be confused with the Spotted Owl in the Pacific Northwest, but is distinguished by its dark barring on the upper breast contrasting with vertical streaking below. It also lacks the spotting on its head and has a distinctive goiter-like ruff of neck feathers. The sexes are similar in plumage, but females are larger than males.

The Barred Owl is a polytypic species with three subspecies generally recognized in North America: one in the northern United States and Canada, one in the southeastern United States, and a third in Texas. Some taxonomists recognize one or more subspecies in Mexico and Central America. The Barred Owl is one of eleven species in the genus *Strix*, a genus that occurs virtually worldwide and belongs to a group of genera often referred to as "wood owls." *Strix varia* is found throughout the eastern half of the U.S. and across southern Canada from Nova Scotia to British Columbia south to Northern California. In Massachusetts it is a common resident in the western and central forests, and is locally common in the southeast; it is largely absent from the Cape and Islands. In winter there appears to be an influx of Barred Owls from the north, possibly triggered by deep snow making small mammals prey unavailable.

Barred Owls prefer dense coniferous, or mixed coniferous-deciduous forests, forested swamps, and river valleys. They are probably monogamous but many of the details of the life history of this species remain obscure. Their courtship involves loud vocal displays including the well-known *who cooks for you, who cooks for you-all*, which is often sung as an alternating duet, with the male calls lower in pitch. They also produce a wide variety of *hoo-ahs*, shrieks, chuckles, yells, laughs, cluckings, and yowls. Visual displays include bowing with half-open wings, nodding, side-to-side and twisting head movements.

They prefer to nest in a hollow in a large old tree, and have been known to use the same nest-site for a decade or more. If suitable hollows are not available they will use an abandoned nest of hawks, crows, or squirrels, adding at most a few sprigs of greenery. In Massachusetts they nest from late February or March to May. The usual clutch is two or three white eggs. The female does most of the incubation, which lasts about a month, and the male brings her food. Incubation begins with the first egg so the eggs hatch asynchronously. In years

when food is scarce, the smallest chick may starve, the asynchrony may be a strategy for maximizing the production of young during years of abundant food. Parental care lasts until fall, but the young are on their own for their first winter.

Like other owls, Barred Owls are superb predators with excellent night vision and large asymmetrical ears that produce hearing so acute that they can locate and capture prey in complete darkness. They are largely nocturnal but may hunt by day, particularly when it is overcast. They may hunt by cruising forests scaring up prey or merely sitting, waiting, and pouncing on prey from a perch. They have relatively small feet and hence prefer small prey, so mice, shrews, and rats make up the bulk of their diet. However, sometimes they take squirrels and small rabbits, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and birds. In southern swamps they may take large numbers of crayfish, frogs, and even fish.

Barred Owls have few natural predators, although they lose in contests with Great Horned Owls. Since Barred Owls prefer mature forests with large old nest trees with hollows, they have declined locally in areas where old-growth forest has been harvested and where rotation periods for harvesting have been seriously reduced. However, Barred Owls have expanded their range in the northwestern U.S. and now overlap with the endangered Spotted Owl. Some biologists are concerned that the more aggressive Barred Owls will have a negative impact on the already reduced numbers of Spotted Owls. Barred Owls are behaviorally enigmatic, usually wary but sometimes absurdly tame, and they are known for showing up in urban yards and parks during winter. In southern swamps they frequently call in the daytime. Perhaps because of these behavior peculiarities Barred Owls are probably our most commonly seen large owl — and seeing one is an unforgettable experience.

--William E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Louise Zemaitis, a freelance artist and naturalist, is a regular exhibitor at "The Loft," Cape May Bird Observatory's gallery. Her illustrations have appeared in *The Birds of North America*, *The Birds of Cape May*, ABA's Bird Finding Guides, and a wide variety of magazines, brochures, newsletters, and T-shirts. She is currently illustrating Pete Dunne's next book *Small-headed Flycatcher. Seen Yesterday. He Didn't Leave His Name. . . . and other stories*. She also leads bird and butterfly field trips for Cape May Bird Observatory. Louise lives in Cape May Point, New Jersey, with her two young naturalist sons, Bradley and Alec, and her husband, Michael O'Brien.