THE PRACTICED EYE

Spotted Owl and Barred Owl compared

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Spotted Owl. Photo: Rick Bowers.

THE BARRED OWL (*STRIX VARIA*) evokes images of swamplands in the deep South, stands of cypress along lazy bayous. By contrast, its relative the Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis*) is emblematic of the deep shade of the West: heavily wooded canyons, and the dense humid forests along the northwest coast. These two species are similar, medium-large, dark-eyed owls without ear-tufts, but identifying them was never a problem in the past. Until recently, they could be distinguished as easily by range as by any actual differences between them.

But that is no longer the case. Barred Owls, known for decades as sparse residents of the Canadian forests, west as far as northeastern British Columbia, have recently undergone a major range expansion in the Pacific Northwest. Having occupied much of southern British Columbia, they suddenly appeared and began breeding in western Washington in the mid-1970s, and by 1982, had spread south into extreme northwestern California. This expansion brought Barred Owls into the traditional range of the Spotted Owl for the first time.

Spotted Owl. Photo: Rick Bowers.

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Barred Owl. Photo: D. Becker/VIREO (x03/1/476).

Barred Owl. Photo: Sid Bahrt/VIREO (b15/1/054).

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The sparse northwestern population of Spotted Owls was already of interest to researchers and conservationists (see the ICBP column in this issue). The appearance of Barred Owls in the area brings some new angles to the problem, including the possibility that the two species might compete, to the detriment of the Spotted Owls But, as a first step in studying the situation, observers must be extremely careful in identifying these two owls anywhere in or near the region of overlap. Their typical calls differ in pattern but are similar in tone quality, and both species have wide repertoires of non-typical calls, so it is usually a good idea to have sound identifications of either backed up visually.

At least one current field guide credits the Barred Owl with an overall length 3½ inches greater than that of the Spotted Owl (21 inches *vs.* 17½ inches), which would imply that size could be a helpful difference between them. This demonstrates the dangers of expressing length as one average figure for a species actually, both Barred and Spotted owls vary considerably in size, with a great deal of overlap. Besides, owls of the genus *Strix* have very fluffy plumage, and the illusion of a given bird's size can change markedly depending upon whether its feathers are sleeked down or fluffed out. So size will rarely, if ever, be a useful field mark for these two species

Viewed from the back, the differences between them may not be apparent. The wings, especially the tertials, usually show more clear and noticeable barring on (appropriately) the Barred Owl; on Spotted Owls, the barring in this area is more broken by mottling. On the upper back and especially the nape, Barred Owls again tend to show a more obvious horizontal barred effect, while Spotted Owls have these markings broken into shorter bars or elongated spots. The same kind of difference may be seen on the back and top of the head at close range.

When seen from the front, however, the distinctions between the two species are clear. The entire underside of the Spotted Owl is marked with short horizontal bars (it would be misleading to call them spots), from breast to under-tail-coverts. Barred Owls have a dual pattern below, with strong horizontal barring on the neck and upper breast, abruptly replaced by long vertical stripes on the lower breast and belly. With a good view, therefore, this field problem is not really a problem. But observers in and near the Northwest should be aware that both species are possible there, and should always double-check the identification when they are fortunate enough to see one of these owls.