
News, Notes, Comments

Great Horned and Barred Owls Nest Successfully in Same Tree

While nest searching on the North Tract of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, in early April 2001, volunteers Jean Sparks and Gwen Robinette found a Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) nest containing at least one fairly well-feathered young.

On 15 Apr, I accompanied them to the nest to band the young. The nest tree was a large American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) with a diameter at breast height of 89 cm (35 in). The nest, typical of and presumably built in a previous year by either a Red-shouldered (*Buteo lineatus*) less likely, a Red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), was in a crotch 15 m (49 ft) above the ground. As I banded the single young Great Horned Owl, close to five weeks old, an adult Great Horned Owl was heard and seen in the area and flew by very near me at least once.

While climbing to the nest, I looked into a large cavity 4 m (13.5 ft) from the ground, 76 cm (2.5 ft) deep, and 51 cm (20 in) across the circular bottom and was amazed to see three downy young Barred Owls (*Strix varia*), two about two weeks old and one quite a bit smaller and apparently several days younger. Also in the cavity was one partly eaten Rock Dove (*Columba livia*). No adult Barred Owls were detected.

On 22 Apr, Jean photographed the young Great Horned Owl, still in the nest tree perched on a branch near the nest. On 7 May, we returned with several other volunteers and staff members. The young Great Horned Owl was no longer present. The Barred Owl nest still contained three young, apparently healthy and well fed, which were banded and repeatedly photographed. By 14 May, the cavity was empty with no sign of predation; presumably all three young had fledged successfully.

Bent (1938: 296) states, "I believe that the Great Horned Owl will not tolerate the nesting of any other raptorial bird anywhere near its own nest."

Typically, his statements are based on his own extensive experience plus a compilation of reports from many correspondents. Neither he nor any of these correspondents, in climbing to many Great Horned and Barred owl nests over many years, had encountered or heard of a situation where the two owl species were found nesting not just in the same territory but in the same tree at the same time with both nests apparently successfully fledging young! Thus, the situation reported here may be unique. My guess is that the Barred Owls had developed a habit of using this apparently ideal nesting cavity and habitat and refused to move when hawks and even Great Horned Owls moved in above them.

My thanks to C. Stuart Houston who reviewed an early draft of this note and made many helpful suggestions which I have taken advantage of in preparing this for publication.

LITERATURE CITED

Bent, A. C. 1938. Life histories of North American birds of prey, part 2. Natl. Mus. Bull. No. 170.

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Great Horned Owl by George West