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THE BARRED OWL (*Strix varia varia*)

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The Barred Owl (*Strix varia varia*) has been commonly regarded as a lonely bird, restricted to the solitude of gloomy swamps and "untrodden ways"; and so I myself considered it until I came to know it better. Its call—one of the most striking and fear-inspiring of night voices—could well come out of the throat of the Wilderness-Spirit itself; a wild scream, followed by a succession of rapid "whoos" and a final, long-drawn "Aw"—and no wonder the solitary traveler on a moonless night quakes as the echoes sweep through the dark woods. There is endless variation in the cry; sometimes a high "Quak" is rapidly repeated; often a long-drawn "Whoo-aw" is given by one bird and taken up by another; rarely the scream alone is heard. According to the popular belief, this is *the* bird of mystery, together with other members of its family; rarely showing itself by day and then only to be pursued by crowds of jays and other birds and mercilessly driven from tree to tree; but intensely active during the night hours, when it floats about as silently as a wraith and makes its presence known when it sends forth that wild cry. When we rarely glimpse it by electric torch or otherwise, we are greeted by two great black eyes set in a round, human-looking head that continually turns from side to side. Where it places its nest and rears its young we know very little about.

Yet this bird has a sociable side to its nature; and the realization of this fact came as a surprise to me. It is often a town dweller and even occasionally takes up its residence in cities where trees are plentiful. Its two cousins, the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba pratincola*) and the Screech Owl (*Otus asio asio*), likewise, as is well known, live in close proximity to man. *Pratincola* seems to be entirely dependent on church steeples, towers and vacant buildings for its residence, and the little Screech Owl is a bird of rural settlements, preferring hollow trees for its home, but readily taking possession of bird boxes that are large enough to house it.



The Barred Owl

While residing in Clarendon County of this state, I had good opportunities to observe the ways of the Barred Owl. A number of these big birds lived in a nearby swamp and every evening before dusk several would appear in the grove of laurel oaks that surrounded the house. They soon became partly tame and would often sit on the garden fence, staring at the house and its human inmates. I frequently had both this bird and the Screech Owl fly around me, swooping and snapping their bills, by giving an imitation (such as it was) of their cries. They would become greatly excited, on such occasions, especially *varia*, and frequently brush me with their wings. Persons entering the gate at the head of the grove would sometimes be met by one or more owls and followed to the house; the birds seemed to regard these as intrusions, as they flew from tree to tree, clicking their bills excitedly.

I have never found the nest of this bird nor seen the young, but it probably nests in hollow trees. I have examined a large number of deserted nests of Crows and hawks in hopes of finding them occupied by Barred Owls, but always without success. The Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus virginianus*), on the other hand, does, at least occasionally, take possession of such abandoned nests.

Several Barred Owls live here in the village of Mount Pleasant, and sometimes, especially during cloudy weather, can be heard softly hooting in the moss-draped live oaks. At night they startle us by sending forth their cries from our back yards or roof tops. I have more than once flashed my automobile lights upon them as they perched on fence posts along the streets. Barred Owls have been seen on several occasions in the city of Charleston.

I consider the Barred Owl an entirely beneficial bird, worthy of the strictest protection. Its food seems to consist almost entirely of insects and small rodents; I have never heard of its attacking poultry; nor have I ever seen it prey upon them, although I have raised fowls where this owl was common.

In closing, I will say that I have made no distinction in this article between *Strix varia varia* and *Strix varia alleni*, both of which occur in South Carolina.

MOUNT PLEASANT, S. C.