

Neighborhood Wildlife Stewards

Teaching our Highlands neighbors how to live safely with wildlife and keeping the wildlife wild.

While walking in the Issaquah Highlands, I have seen the great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*) and the barred owl (*Strix varia*). Both encounters occurred at dusk when owls begin searching for prey.

Last summer, while walking by the community garden I heard an owl calling hoo-hoo-hoo; hoo-hoo. I searched the tall conifers nearby and saw the silhouette of an owl, approximately 20 inches tall, with distinctive ear tufts or horns. It was a great horned owl, called the cat owl because the ear tufts look like cat ears. Though it was too dark and far away for me to see its eyes, great horned owls have large yellow eyes. It is the most commonly seen owl in the Pacific Northwest and the most widely distributed owl in North America.

My encounter with the barred owl this past May was much more exciting. Again it was dusk, and I was walking the Grand Ridge trail. Suddenly from behind, an owl flew low over my head. I was amazed that it flew on completely silent wings. It landed in a nearby tree where I could get a good view of its markings. The barred owl is grey or brown, about the same size as the great horned owl, with a large rounded head and no ear tufts. It has horizontal barring on its throat and vertical bars on its breast. It is often found in mature second growth forests, is nonmigratory and often breeds in the same nest with the same mate for several years. The barred owl has a variety of calls. The most common often phonetically translated as “who-cooks-for you.” It arrived in the Pacific Northwest in the 1970s. Unfortunately, the barred owl population has exploded in the last decade, displacing their close relative the Northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis*).

Facts About Owls

- During the day owls roost in places that offer maximum concealment. If walking in the forest, look for whitewash droppings on branches and rocks.
- Owls have keen hearing, the best of any bird, and keen vision, adaptations for hunting at night. Since their eyes don't move in their sockets, they rotate their heads.
- They are nocturnal predators that ingest entire animals. The following day they will regurgitate the undigested compacted material, called pellets, usually while roosting in their favorite spot. The pellets often contain two or more complete skeletons of the animals the owl ate.
- Owl calls are associated with territorial behavior, courtship, or begging by the young. If you hear two owls hooting, it is probably territorial behavior between males. Females are silent except for the few weeks during courtship.
- Other common species of owls in the Pacific Northwest include the barn owl, Western screech owl, Northern saw-whet owl and the Northern Pygmy-owl. Other uncommon owls are the threatened Northern spotted owl (old-growth forests), great grey owl (mountains) and the burrowing owl (shrub-steppe areas).
- All species of owls in Washington are protected under federal and state law and cannot be hunted.

For more information about owls and their calls visit www.birdweb.org/birdweb/

If you care about the welfare of the wildlife in our neighborhood and want to learn more about living safely with the wildlife, contact us about our next meeting at wildlifestewards@gmail.com

Visit our website at www.nwwildlifestewards.com to view wildlife photos taken in Issaquah Highlands and information about co-existing with wildlife.