

Barred Owls: Who Cooks For You?

By Susan Heath

If you live along the Texas coast and have a yard with trees, I can just about guarantee that a Barred Owl has at least passed through your yard, if not hung out for a while. At my house, I have a standard bird bath with a small dripper and when I put a game camera on it, I was delighted to discover that a Barred Owl was coming to drink in the middle of the night. And I live in the middle of Lake Jackson!

Barred Owls are amazingly common along the coast but, like other owls, they are not often noticed because of their nocturnal habits. Unfortunately, they are also one of the most common types of road kill. I am always saddened when I see one laying on the roadside as they are one of my favorite birds.

They like to hunt in the ditches along the roadside for crawfish and rodents and that makes them very susceptible to getting hit. I've had the unfortunate experience of having one swoop down through my headlights. I tried to avoid it but it happened so fast the collision was unavoidable. They are often active well before dusk so if you take an afternoon walk in the woods, you just might come across one staring down at you with big brown eyes. That is exactly how I saw my first one and it was a huge thrill!

Barred Owls have rounded heads lacking the tufts found on Eastern Screech-Owls or Great Horned Owls. Their name comes from the horizontal barring found across their throat.

The best part about Barred Owls though is their vocal repertoire. They have a distinctive hooting call that sounds like the phrase "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?". I have learned to imitate this call and I've had many a conversation with Barred Owls. I have no idea what I'm telling them but they respond quite well!

Even better than the "who cooks for you" call is their courtship behavior which includes a duet between male and female that sounds like maniacal laughter echoing through the woods.

Barred Owls are not at all picky eaters and their meals include birds, small mammals, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates including crawfish. They are what's called a "sit and wait predator." They sit quietly on an elevated perch (tree, powerline, etc) and wait for their prey to appear below them. Once it does, they swoop down and snatch it.

They are cavity nesters and will use boxes placed 20-40 feet high in a large tree. In our area they usually begin nesting in March. The female lays one to five eggs and incubates them for 28 to 33 days. Once the eggs hatch the male primarily feeds them for the first two weeks. After that, both adults feed the young. Around 4 to 5 weeks of age, the chicks leave the cavity and perch on tree limbs or other suitable structures. They begin to fly at 10 weeks and by fall they are on their own.

Barred Owls are probably the easiest owl to see because they often perch out in the open during the day just as the one in the photo did at San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge in early February. If you see one, give it some space and enjoy your encounter with a magical creature!

Photo by Sue Heath

Caption: A Barred Owl perched at san Bernard National Wildlife Refuge