

# Barred owls take over spotted owls' territory

Sixty-one barred owls is a lot of owls for most areas, but this figure is for the population on Bainbridge Island alone. The island has an owl expert who keeps track of this owl species and others. He monitors them year-round. Jamie Acker is the information source everyone thinks of first when the subject of owls arises.

The fact that his count came in at 61 barred owls is a little overwhelming when you consider the area covered. Also of some concern is that 25 of the birds were juveniles. An obvious question: "How many barred owls can the island sustain?"

Another question is even more unsettling. "What, or who, are they eating?" These are large owls, about the size of a great horned owl, and they will eat almost anything. Their menu includes grouse, doves, quail, other owls and the smaller birds. Squirrels, including flying squirrels, chipmunks, bats, weasels, rabbits, foxes and opos-



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sums are prey consumed by this primarily nocturnal hunter.

Barred owls were considered the eastern counterpart of the West's spotted owl. Once they began to expand westward, they not only moved into spotted owl territory, they took it over. Their territorial expansion reaches across the country from coast to coast.

On a recent trip to the Hoh River, we happened upon something interesting. The object in the center of the road leading upriver didn't move at first. It wasn't even discernible as something alive until it did move. For a split second, it lifted its head and stared at our vehicle. Then it flew into the dense forest bordering the road.

The owl had been spread over

its prey, possibly one of the sunbathing robins we encountered later. There was to be no good look, no good chance to positively identify it. If this had been 20 years ago, I would have assumed it was a spotted owl. Now, however, we know there are good numbers of barred owls on the Hoh.

Studies going back at least 10 years have been done on both species in the old-growth forest that exists beyond the Olympic National Park boundary. How the spotted owl population compares with the barred in this region is a good question. Is it holding its own, or will the barred owl eventually displace the spotted?

Barred owls in the Puget Sound region and on the Olympic Peninsula are increasing in areas other than Bainbridge Island. More and more homeowners are hearing and seeing this owl, which definitely isn't as shy as its cousin, the spotted owl. It also isn't as strongly tied to old-growth forests but frequently shows up in rural settings where

the forest is relatively young.

Calls, letters and E-mails concerning both of these owls increase every year and are evidence of the barred owl's exploding population. At least half of the time, those contacting me feel they have a spotted owl on their property. It has always turned out to be the barred owl. Telling the two apart is accomplished without too much difficulty if the bird is sitting still and you can get a good look at its belly. The barred has bars across its chest and vertical streaks on its belly. The spotted's belly is heavily spotted with white and brown.

I'd love to think the bird on the Hoh was a spotted owl. It was flying toward a stand of old-growth trees in a riparian area. However, chances are the hunter was a barred owl.

**Write to Joan Carson, PO Box 532,  
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addressed, stamped envelope for a  
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