

Winter owling in Pennsylvania

- By EMILY BOHLIN
- Jan 12, 2020

Photos by Wayne Laubscher



The eastern screech owl is a year-round resident in Pennsylvania.



An adult barred owl perches on a dead limb.

(Editor's Note: Introducing Bird Lore, a monthly column written by members of the Lycoming Audubon Society and Seven Mountains Audubon. To pose a birding-related question to the writers, email becky_l@newsitem.com.)

You might not think of January as an optimal time for birding. The days are shorter. Everything is quiet. It seems like most of the forest creatures are in a state of torpor. All of the spectacular, migratory songbirds have long settled in Central and South America for the winter.

However, January is prime time for sightings of the more elusive, charismatic birds of prey: owls.

While spring is the traditional mating season for most birds, winter is the season of courtship for owls. December and early January are great times to hear owls calling as they stake out a territory for nesting and attracting a mate.

With the foliage gone, this is also a much better time of year to see an owl's silhouette through the bare trees.

In northcentral Pennsylvania, we are lucky to have eight species of owls that spend at least some part of the year here. Six are year-round residents — the great horned, Eastern screech, barred, and the less common barn, long-eared, and Northern saw-whet owls.

In addition, short-eared and snowy owls can be found here as winter residents but are also less common.

Most owls are nocturnal hunters, but they can also be crepuscular, meaning they are active at twilight. Bundle up for a walk at dawn or dusk or take a full-moon night hike with friends to catch a glimpse of these fascinating predators dive-bombing a shrew or singing to a mate.

To increase your chances of success during your owl outing, listen carefully — most owls are heard more than seen. Learn some owl calls, and practice being an ear birder.

Visit the right habitats. When looking for a great horned owl, focus on forest edges near open fields. If you know of any locations where crows or red-tailed hawks have recently nested, check them because horned owls use these old nests instead of building their own.

If you are eager to find a screech or barred owl, pay attention to cavities in mature trees. Look closely. Owls camouflage very well against gray and brown tree bark.

Scan tree trunks and branches for “whitewash” of owl droppings. This is a very good indication of a roosting site.

Barred owls may return to the same nest site year after year, so if you find one, make note of the location for next year.

You can also scout for owl pellets — the dry, compact balls of undigested hair, bones, feathers, nails and teeth that owls regurgitate.

Dissect an owl pellet to learn more about their local diet. This is a great way to engage school-aged children in the natural history of owls.

Consider a few precautions when owling this winter:

- Dress for the weather. Birding takes patience, so layer up to stay warm.
- Keep quiet, and view owls from a distance with binoculars, a camera or spotting scope. Give them lots of space. They are out doing important work of hunting for a meal, finding a mate or guarding a nest. Do your best not to disturb them.

We want to see owls thrive for generations to come, so what can we do to help them? The most significant thing we can do is offer more owl habitat.

Put up an owl nest box to attract a breeding pair to your own backyard. This does not require you to have a large wooded property. Species like the Eastern screech owl often nest in suburban neighborhoods.

However, be sure to do your research on proper placement for your location.

Remember that many owls are cavity nesters. If you have dead or dying trees on your property and they are not posing a hazard, do not cut them down. Leave them for the owls.

Lastly, get involved. Go on a birding hike with your local Audubon Society. Learn more about owls and other wildlife in your region. And, remember, there is wildlife to enjoy during winter, so get out and find it.