

# Mecklenburg Audubon Society

## Species Notes: Owls

### Frequently Asked Questions

For those who were unable to attend the wonderful program given by Betty O’Leary of the Carolina Raptor Center, here are a few of the frequently asked questions about owls that she answered for the 50+ people who were there:

#### Can owls turn their heads all the way around?

Well, yes and no. If the owl is facing forward they can turn their heads about 270 degrees to the right or left.



However, if they are already looking straight back they can turn their heads 360 degrees to wind up looking over their back again.

#### Why do owls see so well at night?

There are two factors that contribute to their ability to see well at night. One is the large number of ‘rods’ [light collecting cells] in their eyes that allow them to gather in light even when it is dark. The second is the size of their eyes. The Great Horned Owl eyes are about the same size as human eyes. If you could look at a bird without any feathers on its head, you would be impressed by the size of their eyes. In some cases they are actually larger than their brains! If our eyes had the same brain/eye proportion as an owl, our eyes would be the size of a soft ball or small grapefruit.

#### How do owls hunt in the dark?

Although owls can see well in the dark, they rely more on their hearing to hunt. Their prey is often hidden under leaf litter or in tall grass and can still be hard to see. However, they do make a fair amount of noise, which owls can detect from great distances. If you look closely at the face of most owls they look a little like a satellite dish. This is called a facial disc. Their ears are asymmetrically located at the edge of the facial disc just above and below their eyes. This asymmetrical alignment allows them not only to determine which direction a sound is coming from but also how high or low and near or far away it is. Humans can usually tell which direction a sound is coming from but we have trouble determining how high or low or near or far it is. Owl hearing is so acute that a Snowy Owl can actually hear its prey under snow cover and accurately pounce on it for dinner.

#### When do owls breed?

In this area Great Horned Owls will start begin nesting as early as January. December is a good time to hear them calling to their mates. Barred and screech owls tend to wait until spring to breed. You can hear them begin to call in March. Barred and Screech Owls nest in cavities. It is possible to encourage them to nest in your yard by putting up nest boxes if you have the right habitat for the birds. Great Horned Owls tend to take over old crow or hawk nests that are unoccupied in the winter.



#### Which owls live in the Charlotte area?

From the research being done by a UNC Charlotte student for the Raptor Center it appears that the Barred Owl is alive and well in Charlotte. They are probably the most abundant owl in the metropolitan area. They seem to have adapted well to the urban/suburban landscape. They don’t seem to need a lot of space but they do like tall trees and a small creek or wet area near by so they can catch one their favorite foods – crawfish. Great Horned and Screech Owls are a little harder to find in the area. Great Horns prefer to hunt in open fields, something hard to find now in the Charlotte area. Screech Owls will hunt in woods or along field edges but they need a little more protective cover than the Barred and Great Horn since they can be prey for the larger owls.



