

The Sound of Wildness At Risk

By Leslie Bishop
(Barred Owl photo by Joni James)



As much time as I spend walking in the forests, I rarely see an owl. I hear them but never see them. Then one gray day in February, I took a quick walk down our gravel road, and *swoosh*, a Barred Owl swept across my path and perched on a low branch. Eyes dark as rich coffee stared into my eyes, and I didn't dare move. I could see all his features – pale tan face with bright yellow beak, and bold brown horizontal bars across the neck. After a few minutes, his head turned away from me, and he silently lifted and flew through the trees on broad wings. These rare encounters in nature continue to fill me with wonder.

I usually hear the best Barred Owl conversations at dusk or dawn. Their calls are distinctive and loud: "Who cooks for you?" or in owl language, "*hoo, hoo, too-HOO*". The calling owls often lower the last syllable, so the call sounds like my people in Tennessee: "Who, cooks, for-you all?" The best conversations occur in late February and early March during courtship. Males will call, "*hoo-hoo, hoo-WAAHH*," and females, who may be quite a distance away, will answer. Soon the conversation becomes a duet, building up to raucous caterwauling.

Barred Owls mate for life. Once the pair bond is formed, they will defend a specific territory for many years. During courtship, not only will the pair call in a duet, but also the male will put on a show of swaying back and forth, wing flapping, and side stepping along a branch. The mated pair uses either a large hollow tree or an abandoned squirrel or hawk nest. After eggs are laid, the male will bring food to the nest while the female incubates the eggs. The male continues his duties when the young owlets are in the nest. Barred Owl parents care for their young for about four months, much longer than other owls.

Barred Owls enjoy a variety of foods, and will eat what is most available. Their preferred diet includes small mammals such as mice, shrews, and voles. The owl will perch on a low branch and swoop down on its prey. As an opportunist, they will also on occasion eat small birds, frogs, or snakes.

Yet, as delighted as most people are to see or hear an owl, few understand how a seemingly innocent act can be the cause of an owl's death. I used to toss my apple cores out the car window with the thought that it will only decompose. I did not consider the domino effect: the food would attract rodents who would then attract watchful owls or other raptors who would then be in danger of a passing car or truck. **According to the West Virginia State Transportation Department, a two - mile stretch of highway averages 32,000 pieces of trash. Most of the roadside litter is composed of trash from human's eating habits: beer and soda cans, fast food containers, and plastic soda cups. All of these items will attract animals scavenging for food.** In general, 70-80% of raptors in rehabilitation have been

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injured in car accidents. Not only are owls in danger, but also hundreds of hawks, eagles, vultures, falcons and even woodpeckers and songbirds are in jeopardy.

The sound and wonder of wildness is at risk, and roadside litter is one of the major culprits. Join Keep Brown County Beautiful and Indiana Raptor Center in protecting the local wildlife from trash.

Roadside trash is dangerous to all animals: birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates:

- Beer and soda cans can become deathtraps with razor sharp edges.
- Plastic bags can entangle or suffocate animals, and are deadly if ingested.
- Food dumped along the road spoils and becomes lethal with microorganisms toxic to animals.
- Chewing gum can mat the hair or feathers of animals that contact it.
- Plastic cups and bottles can become head traps when animals attempt to lick out the contents.
- Plastic six-pack rings can become deadly nooses around animals' necks.
- Broken glass from discarded bottles can cut the feet of deer, fox, and coyotes who are foraging along the road.
- Discarded fishing line can trap the legs, necks, or wings of birds, and the legs of turtles.
- Fishhooks can get stuck in birds or turtles throats.
- Lead fishing weights can poison water birds who eat them.
- Cigarette butts leach toxic chemicals into the stomachs of animals who ingest them.
- Dumped chemicals, fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides get into the local water supply and poison animals all the way up the food chain.



Indiana Raptor Center is proud to be a partner of Keep Brown County Beautiful and the Brown County Environmental Alliance

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