

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

Barred Owl at an Essex County Feeder: Shortly after daylight on the morning of 22 Jan 1987 I saw a Barred Owl sitting in a hemlock outside my cabin near Paradox, Essex County, looking in. It was about 20 feet away, a sleepy looking bird with half-shut eyes. Blue Jays lit nearby, some inches away, but none paid any attention. Black-capped Chickadees and Evening Grosbeaks also ignored him, although the birds were coming and going busily through the tree. How long he'd been there, I don't know.

The owl sat this way for about a half-hour; for all appearances, he looked half asleep. Suddenly, he launched out, sending screaming Blue Jays in all directions as he swooped past a table toward a big pine. I saw him at its base, on the ground, with spread wings. His head swiveled as he crouched, his body otherwise motionless. I thought he had a squirrel. But, no, it was a big chunk of suet that the Blue Jays had removed from the feeder the day before. The owl bit it a few times, then flew with the dangling piece of fat to a maple about 100 feet away, but within my view. Through binoculars, I was able to watch him eat. As a jay lit near him, the owl ripped pieces off the suet and wolfed them down. His eating manner reminded one of the way a dog gulps its food. The jay was silent, as near as I could tell from inside the cabin, but it hit the owl's left wing. The Barred Owl shrugged its shoulder and did so with each successive blow.

It took the owl about 15 minutes to eat, slowly, the five inch square piece of suet. He tore off each piece, too big to swallow easily, and so had to gulp and gulp before it went down. The Blue Jays (only a few of the approximately 35 around) hit him on the same spot on his left shoulder, at spaced intervals. The Barred Owl slowed eating near the end and spent more minutes staring into space with half-closed eyes; this is when the mobbing few jays screamed and hit him. One wonders if, somehow knowing he was full, they thought it possible to make him drop the rest of the suet. It is interesting to note that none of the jays bothered him before he pounced on the food.

A Blue Jay yelled, hit the Barred Owl on the wing, the owl shrugged and went on eating. When the suet was gone, a jay hit him twice more, then no more. The owl fluffed and shook out his feathers, then cleaned his bill by rubbing it along the branch, not sweeping crosswise as passerines do. He did this many, many times, then picked his talon clean, turned on the perch several times, and shook out. He then settled in to spend the morning on the perch, and no jays bothered him again. Later, he sat in the hemlock, then flew to a maple and spent the rest of the day there, where no jay bothered him. He did not appear to sleep, unless owls sleep with half-opened eyes. The coloring of his feathers was striking: rich shades of brown and buff, and those big eyes. He was gone at 5 p.m., but a little later was perched in a young beech near the cabin and remained there, looking in.

It is interesting that the suet had been on the ground all night and that the owl, as far as I know, paid no attention. Perhaps a Blue Jay or other bird moved it, or he might have seen them eating and thus realized it was food. With 11 inches of fresh snow on 23 January, the owl did not return, but on following days he again sat near the cabin during the daytime.

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