



## **Creature Feature: Winter 2016**

By W. Scott Douglas

### **Owls**



**Eastern Screech Owl**

Every time I visit the stream gauge on the Creek, I see the feather of a Barred Owl that I placed there on my first visit to the gauge over 10 years ago. Owl feathers are a miracle of biology, perfectly adapted to silent flight. Rather than being razor sharp on the leading and trailing edge they are serrated on the leading and furred on the trailing, and shiny smooth on the bottom. Even moving the feather by hand proves how quiet this arrangement is compared to, say, a goose feather. The feathers are only one adaptation that makes owls amazing hunters.

They also have very large ears, and they are spaced asymmetrically on the head, with moveable ear flaps. I'm sure we would find it comical to watch them hone in on a sound if their heads weren't covered with feathers. The unique almost human face of an owl is designed to direct sound to the ears and to keep their line of sight open. Their eyes are among the keenest in the animal kingdom, with many more light absorbing rods than we have, but fewer cones. This allows them to see very well in dim light, and able to pick up very slight movement at long distances, but not a lot of color. And no, they don't have eyes in the back of their head, but they can swivel their necks a full 270 degrees, which is practically the same thing.

Pennsylvania is home to seven species of owls, five of which are common enough for most people to at least have a chance of seeing them. Because most owls are nocturnal or crepuscular (dawn and dusk) hunters, they aren't active when most amateur birders are out and about. It's easier to find sign of owls; feathers, pellets and large splats of guano are relatively common if you know where to look. The canal path along the Delaware River, for example, often has owl sign. The owls use the overhanging branches to wait for prey to come up or down the path, and the lack of brush makes it easy for the owl to make a swooping kill. A spray of feathers or fur on the path is a sure sign that an owl has had a meal nearby. Owls feed on rodents and other small mammals mostly, but also take other birds, reptiles, amphibians, and even insects. Look along any well used



**Great Horned Owl**

game path where a large tree branch overhangs and you will probably find owl sign either there or at the base of large trees nearby. Owls don't make their own roosts or nests, but use cavities or the nests of other raptors, crows or squirrels. Occasionally, I have even seen nesting Great Horned Owls near Riegelsville using a Red Tailed Hawk's nest high up in the sycamore trees around this time of year.



Barred Owl

By far the easiest way to “see” owls is to listen for them at night. There is nothing more magical than the courting calls of a Great Horned owl booming from the woods on a snowy winter night. “Who who who, who who, whooooo”, is the best way to describe it. In the summer, I can often hear the high trill of a Screech Owl, right in my back yard. By mimicking the call, I can often get them to come really close, but I’ve never been able to find them in the dark. I don’t do this too much, especially when the Great Horned owls are around, since the “Great Horns” will often take advantage of the Screech Owl’s distraction and make them an easy meal. The other common owl sound along the Creek is the “Whoooo, who cooks for you” of the Barred Owl. These denizens of our marshy wooded stream banks are the only owl with dark eyes rather than luminous yellow ones. If you live up on the ridgelines of the watershed, you might be treated to the high short toots of a Northern Saw-Whet Owl. The whistled toots are evenly spaced, 7-10 in a row. If you are lucky enough to own an old bank barn or other old farm outbuild-

ings, you might host barn owls. You probably know it if you do, as these are the least shy of the owl family, and often hunt during the day when they are feeding young. Their call is a scratchy screechy scream rather than a hoot. Barn owls are champion mousers, catching and killing thousands of the pesky rodents while fledging their large broods.

Two other owls, the Short-Eared and Long-Eared Owls are endangered and threatened, respectively, so it is not likely you will see them unless you are very lucky or know exactly where to look. Long eared owls are almost as big as a Great Horned Owl, but with very long ears, almost as long as their faces. Short Eared owls look a lot like Barred Owls, but the stripes are going horizontally, not vertically. If you think you’ve spotted one of these two species in the Watershed, please put up a note on the wildlife sightings page on our website. Of the uncommon owls, it’s more likely you will see a visiting Snowy Owl from the far north. These birds are as large as a Great Horned Owl, but white with black markings. Unlike all the others, they do not breed here in Pennsylvania. Good luck with your Owling!



Northern Saw-Whet Owl