

ON BARRED OWLS...

AFTER SEEING MY FIRST OWL

by Ann MacPhail, New Haven

Owls, like herons and pelicans, are an easily identifiable family of birds, and with few exceptions even the most inexperienced ornithologist would have to go to great length to confuse the owl with any other bird. The fluffy rounded head, large forward looking eyes, concentrated expression and sober habit, give owls a distinctive appearance all their own. But telling one species of owl from another is slightly more challenging to the inexperienced bird-watcher, as I found out myself this winter.

While cross-country skiing along a woodland trail in New Haven on New Year's Day my attention was attracted by a commotion to my left. Upon stopping I could see six or seven birds chattering and flying about in the trees; then to my amazement my eyes were drawn to a large white-brown looking bird staring intently at me - an owl. I had never seen an owl before and hadn't even looked through the section on owls in my field guide book, Birds of North America. I

desperately tried to remember as many details as possible - rounded head, no ear tufts, creamy chest with vertical dark brown stripes, dark brown back and about twenty inches in height - for accurate identification later.

The species was quickly narrowed to either a barred owl or a great gray owl as these are the only two large brown-grey earless owls reported in this area. On consultation with a more experienced birder and reading in The Birds of Nova Scotia that the great gray is so rare that "one is not likely to be encountered in a lifetime", it seemed fairly certain that the owl was a barred.

To the experienced birdwatcher the barred owl is easily identifiable, by brown horizontal bars across the upper part of its chest and dark brown-black eyes. From the literature it appears the barred owl (Strix varia) is the New World counterpart of the Old World Ural owl (Strix uralensis) and is closely related to the rare spotted owl (Strix occidentalis) found only west of the Canadian Rockies.

