

Friends Connecting to Friends

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Barred Owl Excitement by Matthew C. Perry

"There is a bared owl on our house!!!" This statement came as a surprise to me because, despite living with barred owls for forty years in our wooded paradise surrounded by forested wetlands, we had never seen one on our roof. But the exciting surprise was magnified when the owl dropped to the ground about 10 feet from our house at the edge of our created frog pond. No capture of prey by the owl was noticed but the hunting behavior continued around the house for several weeks during April.

Then on Friday, April 24th, my son, Chris, said that he thought he saw an owl go in the nest box. Well, we had set the nest box in a tree near my son's office (my old garage) several years earlier and had not thought too much about it. But on mid-day on April 25th, I asked my other son, Oliver, while he was visiting, if he had time to check the nest box with me. He climbed the ladder to the box opening 18 feet from the ground and spotted and photographed two owlets. What a great surprise and finding.



Adult barred owl hunting frogs from gutter of house.



Nest box on yellow poplar tree.

On May 4th, I checked the nest again in mid-day and was surprised to see that the young owls did not look much larger. I thought that because of the cold wet weather we were having that the parents might have been having trouble getting enough food for two young. I was not positive what they were bringing to the owlets for food, but based on behavior and hunting locations at my four small ponds, I assumed it was the numerous green frogs, which are always less visible during cold periods. I played with the idea of supplementing food with white mice from a pet supply, but then the biologist in me took over and I rejected the idea. When rehabilitating owls and hawks it is easy to get them started feeding on live mice and then switch to thawed ones from the freezer. (Best not to tell lady-of-the-house about mice in freezer!!!)



Two barred owl nestlings on April 25, 2020, in artificial nest box.

My curiosity about the owlet status got the best of me, so one week later, on May 11th, I silently raised my extension ladder for another inspection. The empty nest in front of me was a shock and disappointment, as I thought the white bundles were not large enough to fledge. But then I heard the familiar bill-clacking and less than ten feet in front of me hiding on a

hemlock tree branch was a young owl, still about 75% white with down feathers. I took a quick picture and then immediately lowered the ladder and made a fast exit of the area.

That night at twilight, while conducting my daily deer-deterrent walk in the woods, I walked by the nest box tree. I did not see the owlet in the hemlock but about 100 feet away an adult barred owl swooped down in front of me. It looked like a decoy maneuver, common among birds, so instead of watching the adult I immediately looked up in the tree I stood under. Bingo, there was the young staring down at me.



Young barred owl recently fledged in hemlock.



Young barred owl in tree at twilight

I continued my walk in the woods around my house for another half an hour in hopes that I might see the other owlet. I thought the young would be obvious due to the incomplete leaf foliage and the white downy appearance of the young. I was disappointed in not seeing the second owlet. There is a possibility that it died in the nest box, and the adult carried the carcass away. The nest box contained no evidence of food other than two dark feathers of a starling-sized bird. My son Chris has previously found a regurgitated pellet from a barred owl that had the remains of crayfish, which are common in the creek near our house.

Owls typically lay eggs when temperatures are still below freezing and start incubating the first egg immediately, so it does not freeze. This process results in the first egg hatching several days before the second egg (asynchronous hatching) and the second young is often the "runt." In the bird world it is common to have death of young when there is insufficient food but have survival of all young when food is plentiful. Sometimes the larger young cause the death of the runt in what is called "siblicide."

Two weeks passed since seeing the young despite seeing adults regularly, sometimes at the edge of my frog pond. Then while walking a trail in the woods on May 27th around 8:30 PM I was startled with a loud single hoot above my head. I looked up in a red maple tree and saw a young owl about 15 feet from the ground that was smaller than an adult and with feathers that were lighter than an adult. After making eye contact, it swooped low to the ground and landed in another tree about 100 feet away. I continued my walk convinced that "my" owlet was alive and well. Hopefully, it is feeding on its own and also getting fed by parents. I look forward in the future to hear the common 8-note hooting of the barred owl adults and this young frequently as they claim their territory and ask, "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you'll?"

Online Resources for Gardeners by Sue Priftis

I love gardening, especially during the spring. I enjoy working outside in the soil, weeding, and watching the Virginia bluebells and bleeding hearts emerge. And I love going to the plant sales and conferences – seeing friends, buying great stuff, and learning more about plants. Of course, COVID-19 ended the plant sales and conferences for this year. Fortunately, there are good online sources for learning available. I've taken a few of them, and highly recommend this option.

Brookside Gardens in Wheaton is offering a number of online classes for free or at a reduced cost. I participated in a free course on Perfect Plant Marriages, which explained how to create groupings of plants for shade or sun-based color, texture, shape and form. Mt. Cuba, a wonderful botanic garden in Delaware focusing on native plants, is offering several of their programs online now. Some of these cost \$15. I took their course on Shade Gardening Success, and learned the differences among partial, dappled and dense shade and which shrubs and perennials would thrive under those conditions in dry, average or wet soils. Both instructors emailed their presentations and plant lists to participants.

Here are a few upcoming classes – you will need to register ahead of the class.

1. Brookside Gardens (<https://activecommunities.com/montgomerycounty>)
 - June 13, 2020 Common Garden Pests & Diseases, cost \$10
 - June 17, 2020 The Chinese Kitchen Garden: Beyond Bok Choy , FREE
 - June 20, 2020 The Recycled Garden , cost \$10
2. Mt Cuba Center (<https://mtcubacenter.org/program>)
 - June 16, 2020 EcoGardening: Plain and Simple, cost \$15
 - June 19, 2020 Native Ferns to Know and Grow, cost \$15
 - June 23, 2020 Gardening Naturally, cost \$20
 - June 24, 2020 Making Friends with Garden Bugs, cost \$15
3. U.S. Botanic Garden (<https://usbg.gov/programs>)
 - July 25, 2020 Top Annuals for Your Cutting Garden, , donation requested

4. UMD Extension Service

Dr. Sara Via, Professor and Climate Extension Specialist at the University of Maryland, is giving a series of free online presentations on the impact of climate change every other Wednesday from June 17 to August 26. <https://uucolumbia.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Sara-Via-Climate-and-Sustainability-Webinars-2020-Promo-Flyer.pdf>

June 17, 2020 Healthy soil: What is it and why is it the basis of regenerative agriculture, gardening and landscaping?

July 1, 2020 Regenerative gardening: Successful and sustainable climate victory gardens

July 15, 2020 Regenerative landscaping

July 29, 2020 What can the pandemic teach us about being (un)prepared for climate change and other global disasters?

Aug. 12, 2020 The power of individual choice: what can individuals do

Aug. 26, 2020 Climate change is bad for your health

Registration: https://umd.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJcsf-CgrzwsGtIfIZMd3qJ8dZ0k94bssm_B