

The Beaver Lake Monitor



A publication of the Beaver Lake Management District Advisory Board

<http://www.ci.sammamish.wa.us/BLMD.aspx#Home> • Volume 14, Issue 1 • June 2013

Part 8 of the Series:

Living with Your Wildlife Neighbors: Owls! By Frank Blau



If you are lucky, on warm evenings in Beaver Lake Park, you may be graced with the vocal sounds or visual sightings of nesting barred owls (*Strix varia*).

The barred owls can be identified by their distinctive calls, which have been colorfully described as “who-cooks-for-you... who cooks for you all” as well as a variety of other clicks and screeches. When agitated (or hunting) the owls will make a high hissing noise. These magnificent local residents have made a home in the park for the last several years. Over the last three years there have been two successful births (called a “clutch”) of one to three baby owls. After nesting on two to four eggs for four to five weeks, they usually (and have again this year!) make their first appearance around Mother’s Day. After the first sighting, the baby owls spend a few weeks just peeking out of the nest and making a few tentative steps out into the world. After several weeks, they will eventually make their way out onto a branch and test their wings. At this point, you can often witness the mother owl trying to coax the fledgling owls out with food and soothing calls. Eventually, the babies begin to “fly” to other branches and

hunt their own food. The barred owl diet is generally mice, rats, snakes, voles and other small mammals and reptiles. By the time summer comes around, most of the owls have fully launched and will be off starting their own families in other parts of the park. Owls are very territorial and will even compete with their own parents for resources sometimes! Because of their opportunistic ability to hunt these animals in suburban settings, the barred owl has been able to successfully thrive in areas like Beaver Lake Park.

One thing that you may witness is a baby owl “falling” to the ground below the nest. While it may be alarming to see, do not approach or attempt to rescue the owlet. If you quietly observe, they will make their way back to the nesting tree and use their long, sharp talons to climb back to the nest, all under the protective and watchful eyes of one or both of the parents.

It is also worth a reminder that during this time it is important to keep ALL dogs on leashes in this area. Dogs are instinctual creatures and will charge at and even attack the baby owls if they are on the ground. This could result in injury to both parties, but generally the owls are the ones that will suffer the most in this encounter. Please, respect nature (and the Sammamish City Ordinance) and keep your dog on a leash in Beaver Lake Park.

While not strictly speaking a native species, these raptors have migrated to

the Pacific Northwest and south into Oregon and Northern California in recent decades, in some cases replacing the more reclusive and endangered spotted owl from old growth habitat. Because the barred owl is more robust and adaptable to a wider variety of habitat, it is evolutionarily predisposed to this dominance. While the spotted owl is still under well-deserved environmental protection, the barred owl’s prolific breeding and adaptability have made it the more common species in our ecosystem.

In addition to the barred owls, there is also the occasional large and domineering great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*), a natural predator of the barred owl, as well as the small rare northern saw-whet owl (*Aegolius acadicus*). While sightings of these other raptors are rare, they have been seen concurrent with the nesting barred owls. If a great horned owl makes a permanent roost in the area, the barred owls will often move out to give their more aggressive predator space to hunt and breed. There are also herons, eagles and many other species of birds that can be easily seen in this beautiful park.



Story continued on page 7

