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Owls have been featured in folklore and legends for centuries. In ancient Greece, a coin was minted featuring the goddess of wisdom, Athena, on one side and an owl on the other. The Romans believed that the presence of an owl was a portent of imminent doom, and the early Christian church branded owls as a sign of demonic possession. Some Native American tribes passed down legends of witches shape-shifting into owls that would fly noiselessly over unwitting people to cast evil spells upon them. Other native clans embraced owls as sacred beings and wore its feathers to harness the magical powers of night vision, stealth and hunting prowess. In parts of Africa, the owl is believed to carry messages between shamans and the spirit world; while Polish folklore tells of married women turning into owls when they die (unmarried women turn into doves...hmmm). These colourful tales are fun, but let's switch gears now to learn some facts about one owl in particular.

The barred owl -- or "hoot owl," as it has been nicknamed -- is a year-round inhabitant of densely wooded forests pocketed with low-lying swamps and marshes. It is a sizeable owl, brownish-grey and white, with horizontal barring on the upper chest and vertical streaking below. It has a large, round head lacking ear tufts, and its eyes are dark and prominent. The most distinctive characteristic of the barred owl is its deep hooting call, "*Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?*" Often a bonded pair calls back and forth to each other in a cacophonous duet -- an audible delight for those privileged enough to experience the mutual declarations of adoration. The barred is our most vocal Eastern owl species. It makes several other sounds including caws, cackles and gurgles, and may snap its bill when agitated.

The barred owl does not rely on camouflage. It roosts, sometimes rather prominently, on a tree limb, choosing to simply fly away when disturbed. Now and then, an individual may tolerate quiet human presence, allowing for some nice photographs. It hunts by day and night, but is "crepuscular," meaning activity peaks at dawn and dusk. It watches and listens for movement from a perch or flies low through the woods to surprise prey. The main menu features small mammals: lots of mice, chipmunks, squirrels (flying squirrels, too), and rabbits. It also eats birds, frogs, snakes and insects, and will even wade into water to catch fish and crayfish. A threat to itself is the larger great horned owl, which will eat barred owl eggs, young and occasionally an adult. Therefore, a barred owl will leave an area where its larger cousin moves in.

A nest is usually placed in a natural cavity within a large tree, although a stick nest built by hawks or ravens might be utilized. The barred owl doesn't fuss over nest prep. It might not even bother to add material to the cavity or alter an existing nest. It is, however, markedly aggressive during nesting season, and intruders are driven off with strikes from the feet and loud hooting. Pairs are believed to mate for life. The male sometimes feeds his mate during courtship. Two or three eggs are laid and incubated by the female for 28-33 days, during which time the male feeds her. He will continue to bring food to her and the young, who make their first flight at around 6 weeks of age.

The oldest documented barred owl was 24 years old. Sadly, it was found dead after being entangled in fishing line.

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summered on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.