

Northampton County Parks & Recreation

2024 CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY

Barred Owl Nestbox Monitoring Project

SUMMARY

In 2020, Boy Scout Troop 38 built & donated four barred owl nestboxes & helped us install them in the Minsi Lake Greenway. In 2021, we began monitoring the boxes with Lehigh Valley Audubon Society volunteers for nesting activity during the barred owl breeding season. That year, a pair of barred owls nested in one box & produced two young. Since then, we added four more nestboxes in the greenway, which provided homes for five barred owl pairs & their 12 owlets—six of which were produced this year. As was the case in three of the past four years, when barred owls successfully nested in one or more boxes, biologists from Hawk Mountain Sanctuary recorded & banded this year's owlets for conservation science.



PURPOSE

The primary purpose of this ongoing project is to provide nesting habitat for barred owls in the 1200-acre Minsi Lake Greenway, which supports a healthy population of this species of owl. Barred owls are closely associated with unfragmented forested wetlands, which are common throughout the greenway. Here, they nest in hollows in large trees, where they lay between one & five eggs that hatch in 28 to 33 days. Because they are fairly large, with a 44-inch wingspan & a body length of 20 inches, barred owls require roomy quarters in which to nest. They will readily nest in boxes specifically designed & built to accommodate them. Our project serves to supplement natural nesting cavities throughout the greenway with constructed nestboxes.

A secondary purpose of this project is to monitor & record barred owl activity with the use of trail cameras strategically placed adjacent to active nestboxes during the nesting season. Over the years, we have captured thousands of fabulous photos & video clips of important moments & behaviors in the lives of our barred owl families.

Lastly, we collaborate with biologists to document successful barred owl nesting activity in the greenway. Research biologists from Hawk Mountain Sanctuary visit the nestboxes each spring & weigh, measure & place leg bands on the owlets. This information is entered into databases that track the status & trends of bird populations.



PARTNERSHIP IS KEY

We thank Boy Scout Troop 38 & Lehigh Valley Audubon Society volunteers for building barred owl nestboxes for this project & LVAS volunteer assistance hanging the boxes in appropriate habitat, maintaining them & monitoring them with us during the nesting season. We also thank Friends of Minsi Lake for providing trail cameras to monitor nestbox activity during the nesting season & Hawk Mountain Sanctuary staff for their work weighing, measuring & banding the owlets as part of their raptor conservation research studies.



RESULTS

This year, two of our eight barred owl nestboxes in the Minsi Lake Greenway were occupied by two pairs of breeding barred owls. Each pair produced three owlets. Barred owl pairs are known to show strong attachment to the same nest site, often returning year after year. This is the third year one box was used by nesting barred owls & the second year for the other nestbox.

Hawk Mountain Sanctuary biologists visited the greenway with us on May 7 to document & process the six owlets. All six nestlings were carefully removed from their boxes, weighed, measured & banded with harmless aluminum leg bands & then safely returned back home. The numbered leg bands are unique to each bird, allowing researchers to identify individuals should they later spot the birds & be able to read their leg band numbers. The leg band data is submitted to the Bird Banding Lab in Laurel, MD, where it's entered into a database that helps researchers track trends in bird populations & much more.

Unfortunately for one of our barred owl families, a great horned owl attacked & killed all three owlets & one of the parents in their nestbox on the night of May 9—just two days after the owlets were documented & banded by Hawk Mountain Sanctuary biologists. Astonishing images & audio of the entire predatory event were captured on a trail camera mounted next to the nestbox. Great horned owls are the most common predator of barred owls, killing nestlings, fledglings & adults. They are known to prey on over 500 species of vertebrates & invertebrates, aptly earning them the nickname, "Tiger of the Air."



18 species of prey were identified on cameras being brought to the two nestboxes by the two pairs of barred owl parents to feed their growing families. These prey items included blue jays, ovenbirds, southern flying squirrels, chipmunks, voles, shrews, grey squirrels, eastern cottontail rabbits, white-footed mice, moles, gray tree frogs, wood frogs, spotted salamanders, northern red salamanders, northern ringneck snakes, garter snakes, crayfish & many unidentifiable species of prey.



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