

Apparent Distraction Display of Barred Owl

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On 2 April 1975 I was in the Mayes Lake area of Riverside Park, which is located along the Pearl River in Jackson, Ms. This is in an area of oxbow lakes, cypress and bottomland habitat. I was searching for two fledgling Barred Owls (Strix varia) that I had first found on March 27.

On this particular day, I was looking for the owlets when I heard a rapid, rather high-pitched trilling whistle, very ventriloquial in quality. I felt certain one of the owls was doing the whistling, since an extremely similar whistle is heard in the Great Horned Owl (Bubo virginianus) segment of the National Geographic special, "Strange Creatures of the Night". At this point, several Blue Jays (Cyanositta cristata) started to give their mobbing call in a tree by one of the lakes. I investigated and found both the approximately month-old owls in the tree.

Now both parent owls began to hoot the single note "hooah" and flew back and forth. Then one of them began to make a chattering noise ("chi-chi-chi", very rapidly), while perched lengthwise on a branch, fluttering its wings and with its feet, as though caught on the branch (see cover), which is exactly what I thought had happened. I went over to the base of the owl's tree and it repeated the performance for about a minute, then stopped. I realized this was probably a distraction display, then decided the owls had been disturbed enough and left.

The next day, 3 April, I returned, but the parent owls did not make any commotion. However, on 4 April, one of the owls performed the distraction display twice in succession, waited a few minutes, then displayed again, while the other parent owl whistled as above. This time, the display was not as intense as that on 2 April. Apparently, Barred Owls have a distraction display, although in this particular case it did not seem to be very persistent, lasting at most only a few minutes. This is the only pair of Barred Owls I have seen do anything like this.

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