

Winter Owls in Newton

As we drift toward colder temperatures and frozen precipitation, it is nice to realize that looking and listening to birds during the winter in Newton can be pretty exciting. Of course, there is a different cast of avian characters in Newton during the winter, as most of our songbirds have migrated south while some of the more arctic species have come down to our latitude. Great Horned Owls, Barred Owls and Eastern Screech-Owls stay with us throughout the year. Canadian Northern Saw-whet Owls migrate down to us for the winter, while our Northern Saw-whet Owls go farther south for the winter. We, thus, have four owl species with us each winter.



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Great Horned Owl

The most commonly seen owls in Newton are the Great Horned Owls. These are predators at the top of the local food chain and are second only to the Snowy Owls in size and weight. They have distinctive “ears,” which are not ears but tufts of feathers. You can see them in the photograph above, taken in Auburndale.

The actual ears are on an owl’s head, behind the circular disk of facial feathers. These feathers are orange in the Great Horned Owls, as above. The feathers in these disks funnel sound into the owl’s ears; their hearing is much more acute than ours. As I was taking this picture, the owl was not only looking at me, but probably listening to my breath also. The Great Horned Owls are courting around the time of our Christmas Bird Count in Newton. We see them each year by playing their courtship calls on a “bird app” attached to a speaker or on a boom box. Their calls sound like a deep “Hoo, HooHoo, Hooo, Hooo.” Great Horned owls prey on small mammals up to the size of rabbits and skunks but would not stay away from a crow’s nest with chicks in it.

Another large owl in Newton is the Barred Owl. It has big facial disks which are light colored. These owls have dark

eyes whereas the Great Horned Owl has yellow on its irises with a dark pupil in the center. The Barred owls have no ear tufts. They are not usually found around Great Horned Owls, as they could be eaten by their larger cousins. Their hooting has a cadence that is often anthropomorphized as “Who Cooks for you?”

“Hoo-Hoo, Hoo, Hoooo.”

The Barred Owl below was taken in my back yard on Upland Road. They are seen in both Nahanton and Cold Spring Parks and along the Cochituate Aqueduct. They will also respond to their calls from a “birding app.”

The second most commonly seen owl in Newton is the much smaller Eastern Screech-Owl. The

Great Horned Owls are about 22 inches long and weigh over three pounds; the Barred Owls are about 21 inches long and weigh only 1.5 pounds. The Eastern Screech-Owls are a little over eight inches long and weigh about six ounces.

These little folks are very wary of their larger cousins.



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Barred Owl

When we go out on the Christmas Bird Counts, we always call the Screech-Owls first; if we get no response only then do we call the larger owls. Calling for Screech-Owls after playing a Great Horned Owl’s hoots is an invitation for the little Screech-Owl to be eaten.

The Eastern Screech-Owls come in two color phases, red and gray; both phases occur in Newton. We see

these owls on almost every Christmas Bird Count. They are courting also at that time and fly close in response to their calls being broadcast. Their calls include a descending whinny and a monotone trill. Both calls can be imitated well by humans. These calls are often heard from our bedrooms during the summer nights through open windows.

Screech-Owls often roost in cavities in trees and can be found by paying attention to the mobbing behavior of flocks

of chickadees, nuthatches and titmice. These small birds gather in scolding flocks to drive Screech-Owls away, like crows will do with Red-tailed Hawks and Great Horned Owls. The photograph of the gray phase owl was taken in Cold Spring Park.



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Screech Owl - Gray Phase

The photograph of the red phase Screech-Owl was taken in West Newton. The woman whose backyard was graced by this owl named her Athena, after the Greek goddess of wisdom, whose patron bird was the owl. Screech-Owls are in most wooded areas in Newton and prowl for insects

and an occasional vole. We are unaware of their presence in our midst, while they are eating many small undesirable creatures. These owls are in every Newton neighborhood where there are mid-growth trees. The larger stands of big trees, like white pines, are home to the larger owls and so do not attract small Screech-Owls.

The fourth owl species in Newton during the winter is seldom seen, or heard. This is the diminutive Northern Saw-whet Owl; they weigh in at just under three ounces and are only eight inches in length. They are smaller than our Eastern Screech-Owls and like conifers and wet woodlands. They have been recently heard and seen in Nahanton Park, near the Charles River and the wetlands along its bank area.



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Screech Owl - Red Phase

Their call is a quiet, monotone, repeated toot, toot, toot that goes on for a while. They ordinarily toot at night when we are inside with the windows closed but will respond to a broadcast of their tooting during the beginning of their courtship season.

One of the best ways to get acquainted with Newton's owls is to walk along on our Christmas Bird Count owl walk. This takes place at 5 AM on the day of the Christmas Bird Count. Ordinary bird counting begins at 7AM, when we divide up into teams to cover Newton's green spaces. We return from the owl walk for coffee and bagels with the daytime birders. We encourage you to come and to participate in one or both of these activities; there is no time constraint, so you can leave us at any time. This is a nice wintertime walk in the woods with others who enjoy nature; the entire walk is over by noon. ■

—Pete Gilmore

MISSION

Newton Conservators, Inc.

The Newton Conservators promotes the protection and preservation of natural areas, including parks, playgrounds, forests and streams, which are open or may be converted to open space for the enjoyment and benefit of the people of Newton. It further aims to disseminate information about these and other environmental matters.

A primary goal is to foster the acquisition of land, buildings and other facilities to be used for the encouragement of scientific, educational, recreational, literary and other public pursuits that will promote good citizenship and the general welfare of the people of our community.

The Newton Conservators was formed as a not-for-profit organization 54 years ago in June 1961.

The Newton Conservators Newsletter® is published four times each year by the Newton Conservators, Inc., in June, September, December, and March. Deadlines for these issues are the first Friday of each month in which an issue is scheduled to be published.

We welcome material related to our mission from any source. Send proposed articles or letters by email in MS Word or rich text format to bethwilkinson@mac.com. Digitized photographs, maps and diagrams are also welcome.

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