

Featured Photo: First Barred Owl Record for the Central Valley, California

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On 11 December 2019, Emmett Iverson was notified of an owl roosting in a relative's barn in south Davis. Emmett, Gregory Shilling, Holly Coates, and Zane Pickus received permission and checked the barn, where they found a roosting Barred Owl (*Strix varia*). This was the first record for a Barred Owl in California's Central Valley.

Bart Wickle eventually joined them, and they all watched it fly off to a eucalyptus tree for the night. According to Emmett, the homeowners were delighted to have such a rare bird show up on their property and happily invited Emmett and others to come check the barn again the next morning.

Unfortunately, many birders were disappointed when it was not seen the next morning. Birders checked the location surrounding the barn many times over the next month, extending their search to the adjacent Willowbank Ditch area but had no luck in their quest.

Finally, in the second week of January, homeowners around Willowbank Ditch posted a photograph of a Barred Owl, presumably the same one seen back in December. In the ensuing days, the bird made several more appearances in the neighborhood and on social media but was not yet seen by birders. Eventually, on 12 January 2020, Sean Smith found the owl roosting in an oak tree on public property over the Willowbank Ditch bike trail. To the delight of many birders the owl continued to be seen sleeping directly above the bike path throughout the afternoon.

On Monday 13 January 2020, Gregg Schwab reported that the Barred Owl was taken to the California Raptor Center at the University California, Davis after being entangled in a net at a south Davis fishpond. There, they determined that it was a female and weighed a healthy 780 gm.

So, what happened to this owl? As Yolo County birder Joan Humphrey reported, *"After getting thoroughly drenched, chilled, and tangled in some fine fishpond netting last night (after catching a fish!), the Barred Owl was then taken to the California Raptor Center [at the University of California, Davis]. This otherwise healthy bird needed to stay there Monday night to finish drying out as it had been very wet, but the raptor center was hoping for a very quick turnaround.*

Since this bird is a valley floor first, word of it traveled fast. The California Raptor Center was contacted by both permitting agencies (California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) regarding this owl. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife took the lead regarding its status and instructed that the Barred Owl not be released pending development of a management plan, since it can be regarded as an invasive species. The Department was also interested in learning such things as to what subspecies this owl belongs and how old it is and would probably like to do a DNA test to get some answers.

(It turns out for this first valley floor bird, the agencies requested a permanent home in a licensed facility. The California Raptor Center said they were willing, so the Barred Owl will be making its home there. I think it will eventually be in one of the self-tour display cages. It is hoped that it will adapt well to captivity. It is reported to have a good appetite."

Why is the Barred Owl considered a potential threat to our Central Valley? Historically, Barred Owls were residents of eastern United States, southern Canada, and disjunct regions of south-central Mexico. The species has expanded into western North America and now occurs throughout the range of the Northern Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*; U.S. Fish And Wildlife Service 2013) and is actively expanding into the range of the California Spotted Owl (*S. o. occidentalis*) in the Sierra Nevada (U. S. Forest Service 2019). The species was first detected in California in 1976 (Dark et al. 1998), and today, nearly 2,000 Barred Owl records exist within the Department's species database (<https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Birds/Barred-Owl-Threat>).

Research has shown that the Barred Owls displaces the Northern Spotted Owl, and potentially the California Spotted Owl, due to their aggressive nature, broader suite of prey and habitat preferences, and even hybridization (Long and Wolfe 2019, Wood et al. 2020). Resource agencies have established a large-scale Barred Owl removal project within the range of the Northern Spotted Owl in Washington, Oregon, and Coastal California, and has initiated experimental removals within the range of the California Spotted Owl in the Sierra Nevada (Weins et al. 2019, Wood et al. 2020).

Because of the potential threat that a released bird could pose to either Northern or California Spotted Owls, the Barred Owl will be retained in captivity at the Raptor Center. Birders who did not see this owl in the wild in the Central Valley will have to wait to observe a wild bird.

Thanks to Joan Humphrey for her information and to Steve Hampton for review.

LITERATURE CITED

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Barred Owl
(*Strix varia*).
12 January 2020.
Willowbank
Ditch, Davis,
Yolo Co.,
California

Photo by
Linda Pittman