

IS ANYBODY OUT THERE LISTENING?

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A certain eeriness pervades the calm of the night, brought on partly by the glowing full moon. All is quiet as you stand alone on the road transversing the deep forest. Suddenly you start as an ear-piercing scream is emitted directly above you. A banshee?? A cry of death?? The answer soon comes in the form of paired, rhythmic hoots. Soon three more Barred Owls join in the chorus, and you are enveloped in a cacophony of sounds of every description: Hoots, screams, barks, cackles and yelps. Such can be the experience we know as owling.

Though people have listened to the calling of the owls for centuries, it has only been in recent years that efficient owling techniques have been developed. Usually efficient, hard-striking owling operations are in conjunction with Christmas and migration bird counts. Nearly every count in Alabama has the potential of getting over 100 Screech Owls. The owls are there; it is only the work by the birders that is usually lacking. The main reason for this potential of getting large numbers of owls on a count is the portable cassette recorder. This handy device has revolutionized the sport of owling. A tape of owl calls can be made in a variety of ways. One method is to record the tape from a phonograph record of bird songs. Since only a few calls of each species are on the record, you have to keep resetting the needle when the call is finished to get the desired number of repetitions. Obviously a much easier alternative is to record a tape from someone who has already made such a recording. With sufficient recording equipment, you may prefer to record directly from owls in the field, but recording at home is often easier.

The response to the tape varies from species to species. The Screech Owl will readily respond to a recorded or whistled imitation of its call. This response will normally take place at any time of year, though the best results are usually obtained in fall and early winter prior to the breeding season. The response to the tape is probably a form of territorial defense, but the birds may sometimes just call for the sake of calling. Under normal conditions in good territory, it is often possible for a single party to get over 50 Screech Owls in a single morning from midnight to dawn. The best areas for Screech Owls are wooded areas near openings or water. When deep woods, water and open areas are in conjunction, results are often optimal.

Owling techniques vary, but I usually use the following procedure for Screech Owls. I try to pick a wooded area with some water through which a road cuts an opening. Driving along the road, I stop about every one-half mile to play the tape. In good areas, you may be able to shorten the distances between stops to possibly one-third-mile segments of road, but care must be taken to avoid double-counting. I usually play the tape continuously for about two minutes and then stop to listen. If there is no response, I play the recording for another two minutes unless an owl is heard during that time. If, after five or six minutes of playing the tape, no response is heard, it is probably fruitless to continue, and it is better to move to the next stop. But, getting no owls at a stop in good areas is unusual. One or two owls per stop is to be expected in good territory. When you get a fairly quick reaction from a single bird, it often pays to play the tape a little longer to call up one or possibly more additional birds. The important thing is to give the birds adequate time to respond without wasting too much time at a single stop. Occasionally, you may call up three, four, or even five or more Screech Owls at one stop. Getting five Screech Owls going at once around you is quite an experience. Often the owls can be observed silently flying back and forth over your head in an effort to see what strange type of intruder is about.

Barred Owls can be attracted with a certain degree of regularity, but usually a much greater amount of patience is required. Extensive deep woods or swamps (predominantly hardwood) are usually required for a good Barred Owl population. Even in the proper area, it can sometimes take ten or fifteen minutes to get a Barred Owl to respond to the tape. At stops where I feel there is a good chance for a Barred Owl, I use the following procedure: I play about two minutes of Barred Owl calls, switch to Screech Owl calls and play them long enough to attract the nearby Screech Owls, and then switch back to the Barred Owl tape for a few minutes. This procedure usually allows enough time for the somewhat lethargic Barred Owls to react. The switching between the different calls when combined with the vocalizations of the local Screech Owls often has a desirable effect on the Barred Owls. In fact, you can sometimes call up a Barred Owl with a Screech Owl tape, or vice versa. The "conversation" between two or more Barred Owls when you get them going can really add some spice to owling.

Great Horned and Barn Owls, our other two breeding owls in Alabama, can be attracted to a tape but much more infrequently and erratically than the Screech and Barred Owls. Great Horned Owls call most often during the twilight hours but may also be heard at other times of the night. The method outlined for attracting Barred Owls is also one of the best for calling a Great Horned Owl. Barn Owls are a different matter in that they often respond - when they do respond - rather quickly to the tape, so do not play the recording very long before stopping to listen. They are unpredictable, however, so the results may vary.

Weather conditions are often a determinant to the success of owling. Ideal conditions consist of a clear night with a full moon and no wind. Heavy rain may wipe out an owling operation, but owls can be attracted, to a certain degree, in light rain. Wind is probably the most critical factor - your owl count on a windless night will be much higher than on a count when the wind is whipping through the trees. The main reason for this is that on a windy night, even though the owls may respond, you probably will not be able to hear them. The moon is also a factor; the more moonlight the better, but it is not absolutely necessary to have moonlight and a clear sky to attract owls.

Though owling can be done with little trouble - and much enjoyment can be derived from it - it is work. An all-night owling expedition can be tough if done properly, and the crunch really comes when you have to count diurnal birds the next day. Although it is work, when you are getting owls, it is just like anything else that is enjoyable - you usually do not feel tired until long after you are finished. The adrenalin gets flowing when you are getting a lot of owls, and it can be a rewarding experience. Part of the experience is the realization of the different nature of the woods at night. The trees, the shrubs, everything takes on a different aspect with the setting of the sun. It is quieter, and sounds travel farther, so that you can hear many things you have not noticed during the day. Discovering the many nocturnal creatures themselves is fascinating. There are so many things that you never discover until you spend time outdoors at night, and owling for a count is an excellent method of finding these things. After all, a count is supposed to get a representative sample of all the species in a count circle - not just the diurnal ones. There is also a certain amount of pride and prestige associated with coming to a compilation with 50 or more owls on your list. You can take pride in the work you have done. Like getting a rare bird on a count, successful owling can be exhilarating and can give you a good feeling of accomplishment. More work is needed on the nocturnal birds; and, if birders would spend more time owling on counts or at other times, valuable data could be accumulated. So, get out into the woods at night next count and discover what you are missing!

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