

EVIDENCE OF AN UNUSUAL PREY ITEM IN A BARRED OWL PELLET

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On 15 September 2005, my wife and I noticed several owl pellets below an old, open-branched western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) close to the shore of the beaver pond that fills most of the small valley on Cortes Island we call Swamp's Edge and home. We regularly observe Barred Owls (*Strix varia*) in that very location, which, together with the pellet's medium size, strongly suggests that they originated from that species.

Upon closer inspection, the contents of the pellet revealed themselves as several small bird bones, neatly wrapped in downy feathers, and a number of fragments of crayfish cuticle. Nearby, below the same tree, we found further crayfish remnants, including intact chelipeds (claws) (Figure 1). The crayfish (*Astacus towbridgi* Stimpson) occur in the lower Columbia River system in Oregon and



Figure 1. Barred Owl pellet (5 cm long) showing bird and crayfish fragments and an intact crayfish cheliped. Cortes Island, BC. 15 September 2005 (Christian W. Gronau). BC Photo 3218.

Washington State and were probably introduced to Cortes Island.

While this observation indicates that Barred Owls will feed on crustaceans, the question remains, “do they actively hunt crayfish (maybe at the shallow margin of the pond’s shore) or do they scavenge river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) kills?” River otters do frequent the pond and there is ample evidence that they haul out of the water close to where we found the crayfish remains and owl pellets. Mazur and James (2000), however, report that a Barred Owl has been observed wading in shallow water to capture fish and crayfish.

Over the past two decades the population of Barred Owls has increased dramatically on Cortes Island to the point where this is now the most commonly sighted owl year-round. Part of that phenomenon may be attributed to the owl’s opportunistic feeding habits (Campbell et al. 1974, Mazur and James 2000, Schutz 2005). It appears that crayfish are a minor part of the invertebrate diet of the Barred Owl in North America (see Elderkin 1987, Takats 1998, Mazur and James 2000).

Literature Cited

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About the Author

Christian Gronau and his wife Aileen are naturalists who have lived on Cortes Island, off the grid, for nearly 30 years.