

Great Horned Owl – *bubo virginianus*

Our biggest local owl is named for the large, tall ear tufts gracing the top of his head. He also is our most common and most widespread owl with a range from Alaska to South America. He is very adaptable and survives in a variety of environments and situations. He prefers deciduous and mixed oak forests and is a perch-and-pounce predator. He sits on a low perch and waits for prey to come within his sight. Great Horned owls are sometimes called “winged tiger” for their fierce hunting style and barring on their breast. Some call him the “hoot owl”.



Plumage: This typical owl has a large head with intense yellow eyes, stocky body, obvious ear tufts, a well-defined facial disc, and white throat patch. Feather color can vary from the typical mottled dark brown to light sand color. Great Horned owls found in the arctic can be almost white. Feathers down the legs and over the toes allow this predator to stay in colder climates year round. The ear tufts can be flattened and the head tucked in to give the bird a short-necked appearance.

Wingspan: These owls are 20 to 22 inches tall and have a wingspan of almost 5 feet (35-62 inches).

Weight: Females are up to one-third larger than males. Males 900 – 1200 grams (2-2.6 lbs); Females 1000 – 2300 grams (2.2-5 lbs). Males and females have similar plumage and can only be told apart by their size and the male’s deeper voice.

Territory: Great Horned owls hold a breeding territory of 1/3 to 2 square miles and are very territorial, normally defending their territory November through August. They are primarily nocturnal, but may hunt during the day, especially when they have young to feed.

Eyesight: Owls can’t see in complete darkness, but the woods are not completely dark. Even on a moonless night, an owl can collect enough natural light with their huge eyes.

Their eyes have been estimated to see in dim light at least 35 to 100 times better than human eyesight.

Vocalization: A loud, but muffled series of hoo-hoo-whoohooooo hoo. The male owls voice is generally deeper, richer, and more prolonged than the females. Hooting is most common in the fall and winter by the male as he advertises and defends his territory. A twittering type voice is used by adults with each other for pair bonding and with the young at the nest. Bill clacking, where the bill is shut rapidly and repeatedly, is used when the nest is disturbed or during aggressive interactions.

Diet: 80-90% rodents, rabbits, skunks, birds as big as grouse and herons, also reptiles, amphibians and insects.

Nesting: Great Horned Owls do not build their own nests. They take over the previous year's nest of hawks, crows or squirrels. They also utilize tree cavities, V branches, ledges, and artificial platforms. The nest is usually made of sticks. Great Horned owls have been known to nest on the ground in areas without human disturbance.

Great Horned Owls lay one to four white eggs from early January through February. Their clutch size is dependent on food availability. Incubation lasts approximately 30 days and is done mostly by the female. The male will deliver food to the female while she is incubating the eggs and sitting on the nest with the very young owlets. Eggs are usually laid two days apart, but sometimes as much as three to four days apart. The young can be different sizes in the same nest, since incubation starts with the laying of the first egg.

Great Horned owls are monogamous and will return to the same territory year after year. If each member of the pair survives the year, they may mate for life.

Mortality Rate: 80% to 85% of the young birds die each year.

Migration: Great Horned Owls do not migrate, as we understand migration. There is the possibility of migration from a high elevation to a lower elevation if snow is heavy. Unique feathering covers legs and feet to protect from cold weather.

Longevity Record: 27 year, 7 months

