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Photo by Daniel Simpson

Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)

Identifying Marks: Wingspan

50 inches; length 22 inches. This large owl is named for the prominent feather tufts or “horns” on its head. Also told by its large yellow eyes and conspicuous white throat patch.

Habitat: Forests, deserts, grasslands, suburbs; everywhere except arctic regions.

Nest: Like other owls and falcons, the great horned owl does not build its own nest. Instead, it uses

an abandoned nest of another species. Also nests in tree cavities and on rock ledges.

Diet: Roughly 90% mammals, 10% birds, and less than 1% insects, reptiles and amphibians. Mammals taken range in size from mice to skunks; rabbits being most common.

Voice: A series of six or seven low, resonant hoots: *who, who-who-who, whoo, whoo*. Female’s call higher than male’s. Other vocalizations include screams, hisses, and wavering cries.



Fledgling owls often leave the nest before they can fly. Owlets can climb trees with their talons and hooked beak. The parents will continue to feed them away from the nest.

Tough and Adaptable

Next Door Neighbor: If you hear hooting or see a large owl in your community, odds are it’s a great horned owl. It is possible that horned owls breed in more counties in North America than any other bird species. Unless you live in the tundra, there is probably a horned owl within three miles of your home.

Wildlife Smorgasbord: Great horned owls eat what’s available. In arid regions, more reptiles are taken. Near lakes and marshes, muskrats and waterfowl are more likely on the menu. This tough predator has also been known to hunt herons, hawks, and porcupines!



These large leg bands are the type worn by great horned owls. Smaller birds wear smaller bands. State and federal permits are required to become a bird bander.

Life Span: As with most raptors, over 50% of horned owl fledglings do not live to be a year old. Even so, the great horned owl is probably this continent’s longest lived

owl. The oldest owl banded as a nestling lived just over 22 years. Another individual, banded at an unknown age, lived to be at least 28.5 years old.

According to... John and Frank Craighead, authors of *Hawks, Owls, and Wildlife*, “the Horned owl is the most powerful bird ...it has preference as to its nest location and cannot be evicted by other raptors. It also can hunt or defend itself equally well by day or night. This is not true of the large hawks that might possibly dispute the owl’s dominance.”