

Great horned owl

(Bubo virginianus)

I WALKED INTO the old barn only to take pictures, but the sound of weak mewing drew me further into its gloomy depths. Probably abandoned, two kittens had taken refuge in the wrong place. One, dead and partially eaten, lay on the floor. The other, crying pitifully, cowered nearby. Unable to resist, I stooped to pick up the surviving kitten. As I rose, a light rustling drew my attention to the sagging rafters. Rays of light drifting through holes in the roof glittered on large, amber eyes glaring down at me. I knew I was stealing dinner from the great horned owl that ruled the barn. However, knowing how effectively these large raptors can hunt, I figured it could survive without this one small kitten dinner.

APPEARANCE Great horneds are one of the world's biggest owls. Only the great gray and the arctic owls are larger. Standing 20 to 25 inches tall, weighing 3 to 4 pounds, and with a wingspan of 44 inches, this owl presents an intimidating figure perched in a tree. Its round face, large yellow eyes, and ear tufts (the "horns") sitting wide on the head give the owl a catlike appearance. In Montana, the great horned owl is gray to light brown, with dark mottling and dark horizontal banding on the stomach. This owl is sometimes confused with the long-eared owl, which also has ear tufts.

But the long-eared is much smaller (13 to 16 inches tall) and has tufts near the middle of its head, over the eyes.

SONG Great horned owls make five to eight deep hoots. The second and third hoots often run together, making the song sound like, "You awake? Me toooooo!" The male's hoot is lower pitched than the female's.

FOOD As do most owls, the great horned hunts at night, swooping down on mice, squirrels, skunks, rabbits, snakes, insects, and other birds, including the occasional goose or wild turkey. The owl swallows insects and small mammals whole. The indigestible bones, feathers, fur, and teeth are regurgitated about eight hours later in the form of compact, 5-inch-long pellets.

ADAPTATIONS Though the large ear tufts have nothing to do with the owl's ears, biologists are unsure what these feathers actually do. The true ears are openings on the side of the head several inches below the tufts. One opening is about an inch higher than the other. This asymmetry allows the owl to audibly pinpoint the location of its prey on both a horizontal and vertical axis. A mouse creeping through grass or even under snow is not safe from the owl's keen hearing.

The great horned owl's eye is almost as large as a human's. In the dark, the pupil can expand



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to almost the width of the whole eye, allowing it to take in all available light. Most bird species have an eye on each side of their head and see two views at once. An owl's eyes are in front of its face looking straight ahead, like a human's, so it sees just one view. Unlike a human, however, owls can't raise, lower, or rotate their eyes. To look to the side, owls turn their head, rotating it up to 270 degrees.

Owls also have the ability to fly silently. Their flight feathers have soft, loose edges that muffle the sound made by the powerful wings. Many prey animals are killed by owls before they know what hit them.

REPRODUCTION Like other owls, the great horned is monogamous, often keeping the same mate for years. The male does not build a nest but leads the female to another bird's abandoned nest or to an old barn. In late winter, the female lays two or three white eggs, which take 30 days to incubate. During incubation, the male takes food to the female. The young stay in the nest 35 to 45 days.

HABITAT AND MIGRATION

The most widespread of all owls, the great horned lives throughout North America, from the Florida panhandle to northern Alaska. This adaptable, nonmigratory bird tolerates human presence and development, adapting well to environmental change. It is found across Montana, from the timber bottoms of the Milk River to the timberline of the Beaverhead Mountains.

Biologists say the only threats to these owls is indiscriminate shooting (which is illegal), collisions with vehicles, and West Nile Virus (which is a threat to all bird species).

VIEWING One of the great wildlife watching experiences of my life came one evening when I saw this massive predator fly silently past. To see a great horned owl for yourself, look for them at dusk, when they become active. Check under tree cavities, old nests, or dead limbs for large owl pellets to find an area these owls frequent. Watch quietly from a short distance. 🦉

BY GARY BEELER

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