

# Great Horned Owl

*Bubo virginianus*

## Natural History



**Description:** The only large and heavy North American owl with ear-tufts, a white bib and enormous yellow eyes. Males and females are similar in coloration, yet females are larger. There are at least sixteen recognized sub-species.

**Vocalizations:** Male owls have a more elaborate and deeper vocalization than females. The “song” is a series of deep-toned hoots of 3-6 notes, typically made during breeding season (mid-February in MN & WI). The owl also makes a variety of screeches, squawks and beak snaps.

**Habitat:** This species is adaptable and lives in a variety of habitats: deciduous, mixed or conifer forests. It prefers open and temperate woodlands, swamps, orchards and agricultural areas. Great Horned Owls have been spotted at CNC.

**Migration:** Great Horned Owls do not migrate annually, but will “irrupt” from a region in response to population crashes of snowshoe hare. Typically year-round residents.

**Diet:** The Great Horned Owl is an opportunistic, nocturnal, perch hunter. It has the broadest diet of any North American Owl and will take prey from scorpions to herons. It’s diet is 90% mammals, 10% birds and a small number of amphibians, reptiles and insects. The owls swallow smaller prey whole, generally head first, and often dismember and decapitate larger prey. The owl then casts up a pellet, which contains the undigested fur and bones.

**Lifespan:** Probably the most long-lived of North American owls. The record life span of a wild, banded Great Horned Owl is 28 yrs 7 mos.

**Breeding:** Apparently monogamous and pairs mate for at least five years. They are solitary except during nesting seasons. They most commonly use the tree nests of other species. The female lays 1-4 elliptical dull white eggs.



**Conservation Status:** This species is common but is protected through the migratory bird treaty. Threats to the Great Horned Owl include illegal shooting and trapping, secondary poisoning from pesticides and rodenticides, collisions with vehicles, electrocution, starvation, territorial battles and injuries from their prey. Unattended nestlings and young may be preyed upon by ravens, foxes, raccoons, lynx and other raptors. Adult Great Horned Owls are generally safe from most predators.

Reference: “The Birds of North America, No. 372, 1998  
by Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and The Academy of Natural Sciences