

Life of a Great Horned Owl



They may walk along the ground to hunt for small animals, or wade into water for frogs and fish. Small prey are swallowed whole. Their bones, fur or feathers are regurgitated six to 10 hours later in small, dark sacks called pellets. Larger prey are carried off to a feeding perch or nest and eaten with the owl's sharp beak.

Owls are at the top of the food chain. The only other animals that threaten them are other great horned owls, and man. Wild owls live up to 13 years, but in captivity great horned owls can live as long as 30 years or more.

MANY NAMES

They look like horns, but the two tufts that make great horned owls so easy to recognize are not horns. They're not ears, either – just two tufts of feathers.

Great horned owls have several nicknames. They are sometimes called Cat Owls because of the feathers that look like ears. They are called Hoot Owls for the distinctive calls they make, usually from dusk to about mid-night, when they are beginning their night's work of hunting, and then again just before dawn. Great horned owls are nocturnal, which means they are most active at night.

Another nickname is Winged Tiger, because great horned owls are fierce hunters. Like falcons and ospreys, owls are raptors, or birds of prey – predators who kill and eat other animals.

NIGHT HUNTERS

Great horned owls have excellent eyesight that helps them spot their prey from far away, even in the dark. Their fluffy, fringed feathers help them fly silently, so they are able to sneak up on prey. They are not picky eaters! Great horned owls have been known to eat more than 250 different kinds of animals. Their favorite food is rabbit or hare, but they will also eat squirrels, rodents, raccoons, armadillos, bats, snakes, turtles, lizards, frogs, toads, fish and many kinds of birds, even other owls.

Great horned owls often hunt from high perches. They dive down with wings folded to snatch their prey, using their large talons to kill instantly. Great horned owls can kill animals that weigh two or three times their weight.



LARGE AND IN CHARGE

Great horned owls are one of the largest American owls. They stand about two feet tall, with wingspans of three to five feet. The female is slightly larger than the male. They usually weigh three to four pounds.

Great horned owls may vary in color from reddish brown to gray or black and white. They have piercing yellow-orange eyes. Their large feet are feathered to the ends of their toes.

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WANTED: COZY NEST

Nesting season begins early – in January or February, when males and females hoot to each other. They also bow to each other and rub their bills together.

The pair will not build a nest. Instead, they select a nest abandoned by other birds like hawks, crows or herons. Great horned owls may also move into squirrel nests, tree hollows, rocky caves, or artificial platforms.

Eggs are laid in January or February. Between one and three white eggs are laid. Both mother and father incubate the eggs. Between 26 and 35 days later, the small white babies emerge and clamor for food.

Parents bring food back to the nest and feed the babies. They defend the nest fiercely, and will kill an intruder who won't back off.



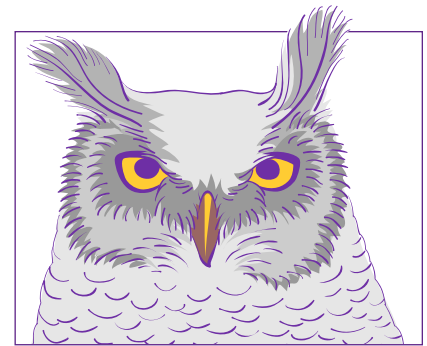
UP AND OUT

At six to seven weeks, the young venture out onto nearby branches to explore. By 10 weeks, they are learning to fly. The parents will continue feeding them for a few more weeks, until they learn how to hunt for themselves.

That first summer the young owls continue to live in the same area as their parents. By fall, they fly off to find their own territory.

The parents also split up when the babies are on their own. Great horned owls are solitary birds that prefer to live alone. Next year they will select another mate.

Great horned owls are year-round residents. Only those who live in the extreme north move south for the winter.



COMING BACK

Just like other birds of prey such as the peregrine falcon and the osprey, great horned owls nearly became extinct because of widespread use of DDT on crops. The DDT was used to keep away bugs that damaged the crops. But when rodents ate the crops, the DDT got into their bodies, and when great horned owls ate the prey, they were also affected by the DDT. It made the shells of their eggs so thin that they broke when the mothers sat on them.

Fortunately, scientists discovered what was happening and DDT was banned. The great horned owl population is now recovering.



FAMILY LIFE ON OWL CAM

You can watch the family of Sally the great horned owl up close on Xcel Energy's Owl Cam during nesting season. Their nest box sits about 260 feet up on a stack at Xcel Energy's Valmont Station in Boulder, Colorado.

Because owls are nocturnal, we use an infrared camera to capture images of the activity in the nest.

You can visit Owl Cam at the Xcel Energy Web site, www.xcelenergy.com.