



© Ken Davis

common name	Great Horned Owl
scientific name	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>
phylum	Chordata
class	Aves
order	Strigiformes
family	Strigidae
habitat	grasslands, woods, mountain forests, desert canyons, chaparral, marshes and city parks
size	46 to 63 cm tall

description The Great Horned Owl is a bulky bird, with a dark brown body and a white throat. The brown body is marked with darker spots and stripes. The face is grayish around a pair of large, bright, yellow eyes. The head is decorated with two large tufts of feathers that look like horns.

fun facts Just like dogs, a Great Horned Owl uses its ear tufts to show how it is feeling. When the owl is irritated the tufts lie flat on its head. When it is curious the tufts stand straight up.

This owl can turn its head further than most creatures because of the extra vertebrae (neck bones) in its neck. Because its eyes are fixed in their sockets, (meaning the eyes cannot look up, down, or side-to-side), the owl must move its whole head to look around.

life cycle In January or February Great Horned Owls begin nesting. The female lays 2 or 3 white eggs. For 30 to 35 days, the male and female take turns sitting on them. When the owlets (baby owls) hatch, the parent owls feed and defend them from predators. If one of the owlets falls out of the nest, the parents will feed it on the ground. The young fledge (grow feathers for flying) in 45 to 55 days. Great Horned Owls often live for more than 12 years.

ecology

Great Horned Owls do not make their own nests. They often use an abandoned hawk or heron nest. Sometimes they nest in tree hollows, abandoned buildings or barns.

The Great Horned Owl eats many different animals, both small and large. The owls will eat squirrels, rabbits, mice, skunks, pocket gophers, voles, snakes, house cats, bats, beetles, frogs, toads, grasshoppers, ducks, grouse, pheasants, and even other owls. The Great Horned Owl has no major predators; it is at the top of the food web.

conservation

The Great Horned Owl is very common. Farmers sometimes shoot the owls because they prey on farm birds like chickens and ducks. To protect the owls from this, the federal government has made it illegal to harm Great Horned Owls.

investigate

Owls often swallow small prey whole. Then they regurgitate (throw up) the bones and feathers or fur in a small lump called an owl pellet. Look for owl pellets under the telephone poles where owls perch. If the pellets are heated to kill germs, they can be dissected (pulled apart) to find the remains of their prey. It is fun to try to put together parts of skeletons to figure out what the owl ate for dinner.

Compare your hearing

Owls have one ear that's higher than the other. This helps them locate the source of a sound in three dimensions: left or right, near or far, and up or down. How could this ability help a Great Horned Owl?

Have someone in your group move out of your sight and clap from different places, some high and some low. Your head will turn to find the direction of the sound. We humans have trouble finding the height of a sound. Try tipping your head sideways to see if it helps you.