

GREAT HORNED OWLS

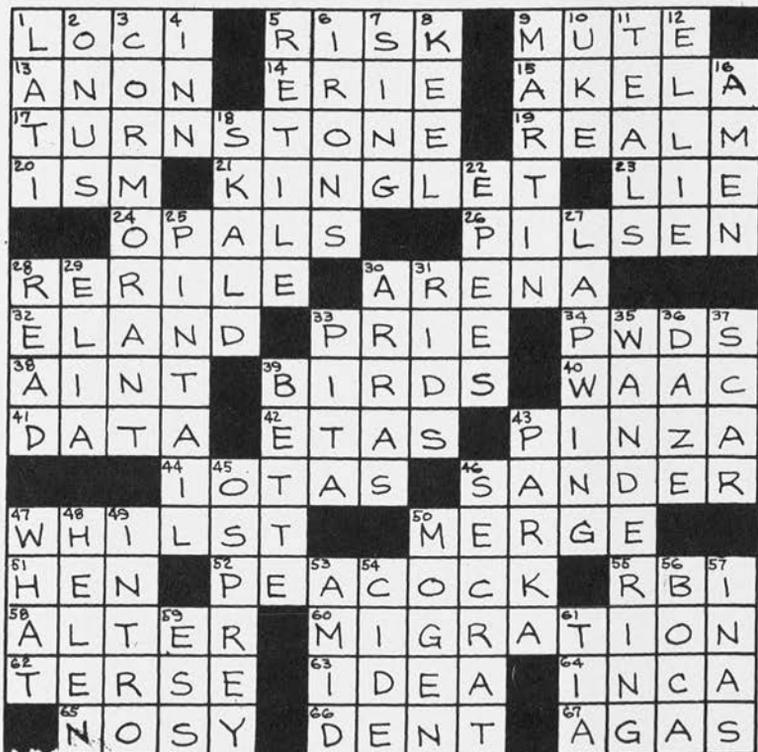
by Wayne Hanley, M.A.S.

The best way to find a Great Horned Owl consists of looking at the ground, rather than scanning the tree limbs above. This is because Great Horned Owls, like most other raptors, cough up pellets, which are neat packages of felt wrapped tightly around a few mouse bones and a mouse skull or two. The owl swallows mice whole; its stomach digests the mouse's meat, rejects the fur and bones, and creates the pellet.

Normally, a Great Horned Owl produces a pellet a day. Captive owls usually cough up the pellet about eight hours after eating. Since Great Horned Owls seem to eject the pellet before leaving the roost, one can detect the presence of the roost by the scattering of pellets under a tree. The technique of searching for pellets is not entirely reliable when one searches for an owl nest. While incubating, the female owl does not eject pellets at the nest site itself. One may find the vicinity of the nest, however, by locating the roost of the male owl, who remains close while the female is on the nest. The male ejects pellets at his roost even during the nesting season.

The Great Horned Owl lays its eggs in an old nest of a large hawk, rather than nesting in holes, as many smaller owls do. Great Horneds never add any material to the nest, nor apparently alter it in any way. The birds seem to prefer nests in coniferous trees, if these are available.

Searching for a Great Horned Owl's nest is a perilous occupation. The male remains on guard and does not hesitate to attack anything, including a human, that approaches the nest area. These are powerful birds, armed with huge talons that can rip a human scalp with the efficiency of a surgeon's knife. One does not have to be that near to the nest to be attacked; it is sufficient to have entered the territory that the male is defending.



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Plate by John Henry Dick from
"A Field Guide to the Birds of India."
(Actual plate is in full color.)

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