

## ABOUT THE COVER: GREAT HORNED OWL

The Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) is the most fearsome predator among North American birds. Ernest Thompson Seton described Great Horned Owls with such phrases as "untamable ferocity," and ranked "these winged tigers among the most pronounced and savage of the birds of prey." Ill-tempered and dangerous as pets, in the wild they will attack anything that approaches their nest, as the innumerable accounts of injuries from people who have attempted to climb to their nests attest. If you want to investigate Great Horned Owl nests, you had better have a flak jacket and hard hat.

Identification of the Great Horned Owl should not be a problem. It is our only large "horned owl," and its heavy barring below and white bib readily distinguishes it from other North American species. In flight the feather-tuft horns are pressed back and not visible, but the squat, bull-headed appearance identifies it. Sexes are similar in appearance, although the female is much larger. First-winter birds are similar to adults, but the white bib is less conspicuous, and they have shorter ear tufts.

Great Horned Owls are found throughout the Western Hemisphere from Alaska to Argentina, and have been divided into as many as eleven geographic races or subspecies. Most birds prefer deep forest, but they are also found in more open country and inhabit more habitat types than any other owl species. In North America they are largely nonmigratory, although arctic birds tend to move south during the winter and become an irruptive species when arctic hare populations collapse. These owls tend to be solitary except during the breeding season (in captive pairs the female often kills and eats the male) and often roost in deep coniferous forests. They elicit mobbing behavior from jays, crows, and small passerines, and are frequently located due to the ruckus caused by mobbing birds.

The low-pitched hootings of the Great Horned Owl are well known to most, with the "who . . . whoo-who . . . who . . . who" heard most often in New England in January and February during the initiation of breeding. The males have generally lower pitched and more varied calls. Aggressive situations may elicit growling notes, and various cries and screams have been reported, especially from young owls. The early nesting, often while snow covers the branches and nest, is probably related to their prolonged nesting period. The usually two or three grainy white eggs are incubated, mostly by the female, for about a month. Because the eggs hatch asynchronously, the owlets vary in size. They fledge six to seven weeks later but may not fly until nine to twelve weeks of age. They do not achieve their first-winter plumage until about twenty weeks, and the parents may feed them for several more months.

Great Horned Owls generally commandeered or use abandoned nests of Red-tailed Hawks, crows, or even squirrels, and generally do very little refurbishing beyond a lining of downy feathers. The nests are usually thirty to seventy feet

above the ground, often in pines, but they can also be in hollow logs, stumps, or tree cavities. I have seen them nesting on power line stations. The birds are probably monogamous. Courtship displays by the male include bowing and dancing with half-open wings, as well as calling and bill snapping and clicking. They engage in mutual caressing with their bills. The male usually brings food to the female. The owlets do not open their eyes until a week old, and soon are clothed in fluffy white or tan down, an age at which these savage birds are very cute and endearing.

Great Horned Owls attack virtually anything that walks, crawls, flies, or swims and is not too large for them to kill. They hunt primarily in the evening and before dawn, where they usually fall with nearly closed wings or glide silently down upon their prey. Rough-edged first primary wing feathers reduce vortex noise. This characteristic combined with deeply fluted primaries help produce their silent flight. They have spectacular vision and asymmetrical ear cavities that aid them in locating prey. They prefer rabbits and rodents but kill larger mammals, including domestic cats, opossums, porcupines, and skunks. I remember well my mother complaining that the stuffed Great Horned Owl that my father had in his study smelled of skunk. My in-laws from Nebraska swear that their small dog fell prey to the Great Horned Owls that lived in their bottomland cottonwoods. These aggressive owls kill and eat Red-tailed and Red-shouldered hawks, turkeys, and bitterns, and have been recorded killing Barred and Barn owls. They catch fish and amphibians by wading into water, and invertebrate prey includes scorpions. They are known to cache food and thaw frozen food in winter by "incubating" it.

Great Horned Owls have few if any predators except for man. They have been widely hunted and are frequent victims of power lines and automobiles. Despite habitat alteration it remains a common owl with surprising population densities. The 1986 Newburyport Christmas Count reported, for example, sixty-two Great Horned Owls. This sole American representative of the world's eagle owls is one of our most interesting, ferocious, and exciting birds. W. E. Davis, Jr.

### MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

Gordon Morrison's last cover portrait for *Bird Observer* appeared on the June 1991 issue. With two other artists, he has just completed a mural entitled, "North Attleboro Through the Years," now in place in the North Attleboro town hall. Gordon is also illustrating *A Field Guide to Ecology of Western Forests*, authored by John Kricher and due to be released in the spring of 1993. Gordon is writing and illustrating a series, "Birds in the Garden," appearing in *Horticulture Magazine*, and featuring such species as the Purple Martin, Northern Cardinal, and Eastern Bluebird. Gordon can be reached at 52 Bulfinch Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760.

M. Steele