



CASCADES RAPTOR CENTER

Great Horned Owl Overview

The Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) is recognized as one of North America's fiercest and most widespread owls. This remarkable bird is renowned for its adaptability and impressive predatory skills.

Physical Characteristics

One of the Great Horned Owl's most distinctive features is its **plumicorns**, or ear-like feather tufts. These tufts aid in camouflage and play a role in communication.

The owl's **facial disk** is a circle of stiff feathers surrounding its eyes, designed to funnel sound efficiently to its ear cavities. This adaptation enhances the bird's auditory sense, making it highly effective at locating prey.

With **binocular vision**, Great Horned Owls have forward-facing eyes that provide excellent depth perception. Unlike many animals, owls cannot move their eyes within their sockets.

The owl's neck is made up of **14 vertebrae**, allowing it to turn its head up to 270 degrees in either direction. In comparison, humans have only 7 neck vertebrae.

Like all birds, Great Horned Owls possess a **nictitating membrane**, a transparent third eyelid that protects the cornea from scratches during hunting.

Their **talons** consist of four extremely sharp and powerful toes, each ending in a claw. The owl's strong feet and talons require up to 28 pounds of force to open when clenched.

The foot structure is zygodactyl: toe number 1 points backward, toes 2 and 3 point forward, and toe number 4 can move both front and back.

Behavior and Activity

Great Horned Owls are primarily **nocturnal**, but they are also active at dawn and dusk, making them **crepuscular**.

Size

Wingspan: 38–60 inches

Weight: 32–88 ounces (1.6–5.5 lbs)

Length: 18–26 inches

Habitat

Great Horned Owls are commonly found in forests, but they also inhabit a variety of semi-open environments, including deserts, wetlands, grasslands, and even cities and suburbs.

Diet and Hunting

These owls have a diverse diet, feeding on large mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Their primary prey consists mostly of mammals and birds.

- **Mammals:** Mice, chipmunks, voles, rabbits, squirrels, opossums, bats
- **Birds:** Songbirds, crows, ducks, geese, hawks, smaller owls
- **Reptiles and Amphibians:** Snakes, lizards, frogs

Because of their limited sense of smell, Great Horned Owls are the only owl species known to prey on skunks.

Lacking teeth for chewing, owls swallow their prey whole, later regurgitating indigestible parts like bones, fur, and feathers as pellets. Studying these pellets allows us to learn more about their diet by identifying the bones of consumed prey.

Migration and Distribution

Great Horned Owls are among the most widespread raptors in North America. Generally residential and non-migratory, some individuals may travel long distances southward during colder months. Their range extends across Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, and all U.S. states except Hawaii. Each owl maintains a territory with an average home range of about 1.5 square miles and often communicates by hooting.

Regional differences in plumage exist: those in the Pacific Northwest are dark and sooty, while those in the Southwest are paler and grayer, and individuals in subarctic Canada are almost white.

Nesting

Great Horned Owls are among the earliest breeding raptors in North America, with the nesting season beginning as early as December. They do not build their own nests, instead reusing stick nests constructed by hawks, eagles, herons, or other large birds. Early nesting gives them first choice of sites not yet occupied by others. They may also nest in tree hollows, caves, or on cliff ledges. Average clutch size is 2–3 eggs.

Conservation Status

As important predators, Great Horned Owls have a significant impact on small animal populations. To help protect them and other raptors, avoid using rodent poisons and ensure that fences, netting, and barbed wire are well maintained to prevent entanglement and injury.

Ecological Service

Great Horned Owls play a vital role in controlling rodent and small mammal populations, contributing to the balance of their ecosystems.