



Great Horned Owl

Bubo virginianus

The great horned owl is the largest owl species found in North Carolina. It and the barred owl are found in most of the rural areas of our state. The two species are quite vocal at times and are both referred to as “hoot owls” by many people. The great horned owl’s closest relative is the eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*) of Eurasia.

In his *Birds of North Carolina*, T. Gilbert Pearson states that “the Great Horned Owl is the feathered tiger of the air. Like the striped terror of the jungle, it hunts by night; among birds and small mammals it is all powerful, and its work of destruction is swift and sure.” This is a good summary of one of the most efficient predators, avian or mammalian, inhabiting our state.

History and Status

The great horned owl is a fairly common species in North Carolina. Because it is nocturnal, most folks might never see a horned owl, but most have heard their staccato, morse-code hooting—“hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo” on cold or cool nights. Most calling takes place in late fall and winter, during the courtship period. This is generally the upland counterpart of the barred owl, which is mostly found in bottomland forests.

Dispersed by rural folk because of its ability to prey successfully on domestic poultry, it was formerly killed whenever possible.

Description

The two prominent ear tufts of feathers, resembling horns,

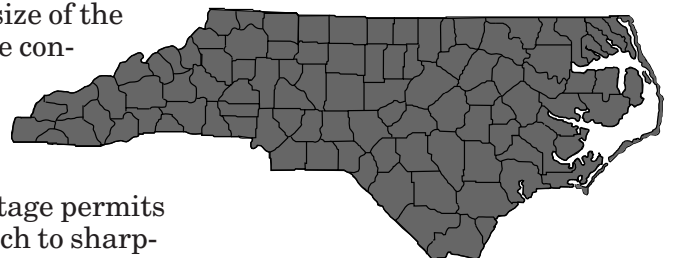
give this owl its common name. In North Carolina the plumage is generally dark reddish brown, heavily streaked or striped over its entire plumage. Subspecies in the western and northern parts of North America have much grayer plumage. The large, glaring eyes are a brilliant yellow, giving the animal a cat-like appearance. Characteristic of the raptor group, the females of this species are 25 to 30 percent larger than the males. The horned owl’s vision, like that of other members of this family, is exceptional. The huge eyes face forward, giving the animal binocular vision and enabling it to pinpoint prey with deadly accuracy. Additionally, the night vision of the owl group is legendary. The auditory sense is also especially keen in owls. Two factors that serve to enhance their hearing are the specialized facial disc feathers, which somehow funnel sound waves into the ear, and the large size of the owl ear. The unique construction of owl feathers enables owls to fly with virtually no sound. This advantage permits undetected approach to sharp-eared prey such as rodents and birds, even smaller owl species.



Habitat and Habits

Usually horned owls prefer habitat consisting of wooded ridges with pines, oaks and hickories, but these birds can be found anywhere where appropriate food items can be procured. One owl was observed perched on one of the taller office buildings in downtown Raleigh, N.C., during the 1994 Christmas bird count! It was probably taking advantage of the abundant domestic pigeons and park squirrels in this concrete-and-asphalt ecosystem. Although habitat destruction appears to have reduced horned owl numbers, the owls have demonstrated resilience to drastic, man-made environmental changes.

Horned owls are opportunists. They eat almost any protein



Range Map:
Found statewide

**WILD
Facts**

source they are capable of killing—beetles as well as Canada geese, small rodents and skunks, porcupines and domestic cats.

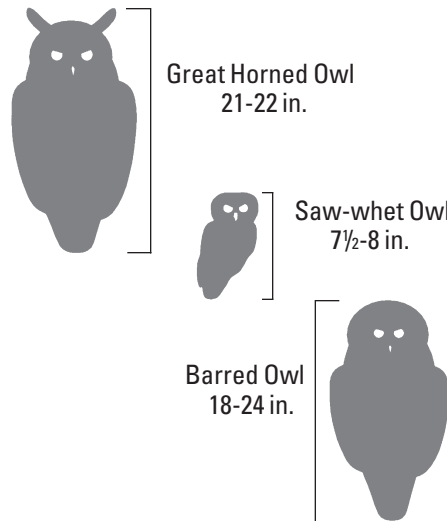
These owls are capable of constructing an adequate nest but appear more inclined to utilize an abandoned red-tailed hawk nest. These two species often frequent the same area, and old hawk nests are usually available. In North Carolina nesting may begin as early as January. The owl pair engages in a very vocal courtship before mating and egg laying. This reproductive behavior, coupled with displays with wings spread, head bowing and bill clicking, serves to establish and maintain a pair bond between the two.

On average, great horned owls lay two large and oval white eggs, with the female assuming responsibility for the month-long incubation. Opossums and raccoons eat eggs and young owlets, and both parents defend the nest vigorously. The young are fed small mammals and birds, with cottontail rabbits preferred as food for the young.

When first hatched, the baby owls are covered in gray-white down. Their eyes are closed and open only after about one week. During these first few days, they are extremely weak and can barely raise their heads to be fed. The low temperatures make constant brooding by one of the parents necessary. After two weeks the young owls have attained about one-third of their adult weight. As the young owls reach maturity, the parents cut back on feeding to encourage the adolescents to venture forth and hunt. Only one brood is reared each year.

Range and Distribution

The great horned owl inhabits most of the land mass in the Western Hemisphere. It is found from northern Canada to Tierra del Fuego. It is found in all 100 counties of North Carolina. Large, unbroken tracts of land with un-



disturbed habitat, such as those found in national forests and national and state parks, afford ideal conditions for such species as the great horned owl.

People Interactions

As the ever-increasing human population takes its toll on such habitat, the numbers of this owl species will inevitably decrease. Its role as a control on rodent populations has finally come to be recognized and fully appreciated.

References

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 Potter, Eloise, James F. Parnell and Robert Teulings *Birds of the Carolinas* (University of North Carolina Press, 1980).
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Credits

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GREAT HORNED OWL

Classification

Class: Aves
 Order: Strigiformes

Average Size

Length: 21 to 22 in.
 Wingspan: 54 in.
 Weight: 53 oz.

Food

Mammals up to size of porcupine, woodchuck or skunk; birds up to size of Canada goose; any insects; any reptiles or amphibians.

Breeding

The great horned owl is monogamous. It usually chooses an old hawk nest in which to lay two large, white eggs. Actual breeding is preceded by an interlude of hooting and visual displays between the two owls.

Young

The newly hatched owls are covered with a coat of thick down and are quite weak and helpless for several days. Their eyes open in 7 to 8 days. Both parents feed the young, with one of them constantly at the nest for warmth and defense, if necessary. Cottontail rabbits seem a preferred item for feeding the young owls. Four to five weeks are required for the nestlings to achieve maximum size. Plumage development is slower, and the nestlings are approximately 9 weeks old before flying is attempted.