

Great Horned Owl

COOL FACTS:

Scientific name:	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>
Average weight:	Males average about 2.7 lbs. Females average about 3.5 lbs.
Average height:	Measures around 55 cm (22 in)
Average wing span:	122 cm (48 in)
Did you know?	When clenched, a Great Horned Owl's strong talons require a force of 28 pounds to open. They use this deadly grip to sever the spine of large prey.



PHYSIOLOGY

Great Horned Owls are covered in extremely soft feathers that insulate them against the cold winter weather and help them fly very quietly in pursuit of prey. Their short, wide wings allow them to maneuver among the trees of the forest. Great Horned Owls have large eyes, pupils that open widely in the dark, and retinas containing many rod cells for excellent night vision. Their eyes don't move in their sockets, but they can swivel their heads more than 180 degrees to look in any direction. They also have sensitive hearing, thanks in part to facial disc feathers that direct sound waves to their ears. Even though the female Great Horned Owl is larger than her mate, the male has a larger voice box and a deeper voice.

HABITAT/ BEHAVIOUR

The Great Horned Owl is very adaptable in terms of habitat. The broad range of habitats they use includes deciduous and evergreen forests, swamps, desert, tundra edges, and tropical rainforest, as well as cities, orchards, suburbs, and parks. During the daytime it roosts in large trees but may occasionally be in crevices or small caves in rocks or in dense shrubbery. Pine and other coniferous trees may be preferred where available since they are more dense and provide cover throughout the year.

Great Horned Owls have the most diverse diet of all North American raptors. Their prey range in size from tiny rodents and scorpions to hares, skunks, geese, and other raptors. They eat mostly mammals and birds. They supplement their diet with reptiles, insects, fish, invertebrates, and sometimes carrion. Although usually nocturnal hunters, Great Horned Owls sometimes hunt in broad daylight. After spotting their prey from a perch, they pursue it on the wing over woodland edges, meadows, or other habitats, they may even walk along the ground to stalk small prey around bushes or other obstacles.

Great Horned Owls are some of the earliest-breeding birds, this gives them an advantage over other raptors. These strictly monogamous birds choose their mates by December to January. Most tree nests used by Great Horned Owls are those constructed by other animals, about 4.5 to 22 m (15 to 72 ft.) off the ground. They often take over a nest used by some other large bird, sometimes adding feathers.

Average clutch size is from 1-3 eggs. Females usually do all the incubation and rarely move from the nest, while the male owl captures food and brings it to her. Brooding is almost continuous until the offspring are about 2 weeks old, after which it decreases. The young are not usually competent fliers until they are about 10 to 12 weeks old.

MORE COOL FACTS:

If you hear an agitated group of cawing American Crows, they may be mobbing a Great Horned Owl. Crows may gather from near and far and harass the owl for hours. The crows have good reason, because the Great Horned Owl is their most dangerous predator.

The Great Horned Owl is the provincial bird of Alberta.