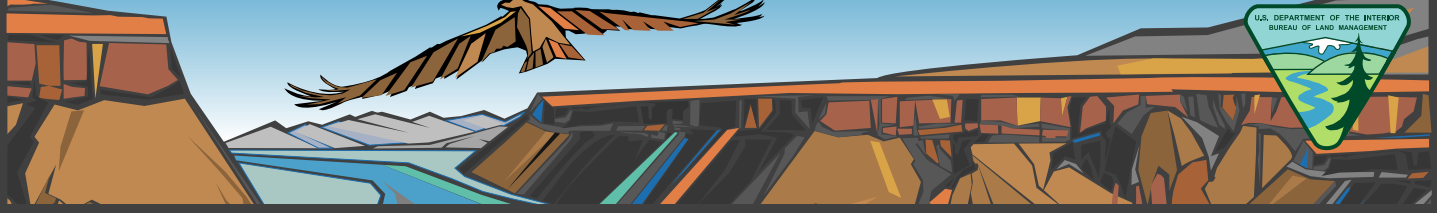


Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area



Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)

Description/Size

Wing span: 36-60 inches

Length: 18-25 inches

Weight: 2-5 pounds

The most widespread, one of the most powerful and the only large/heavy owl with prominent ear tufts in North America. Both sexes generally similar in coloration patterns, though coloration varies between regions correlated to regional humidity: from darkest populations along humid northern Pacific coast (US and Canada) to very pale populations in Southwest and in dry western and subarctic prairies. Owl varies in overall color from whitish to orange-buff to brownish-gray to dark brown but markings remain fairly constant. Under parts have thin dark brown bars on a whitish base with the upper chest bars becoming somewhat blotchy. Throat has a bold white patch; white mustache and white to tan along the sides of the bill into the eyebrows. Backside has fine dark mottling with dark bars on the primaries and tail. Moderately well-defined facial disk is bordered at the sides with black. Ear-tufts may be flattened and head tucked in, giving it a short-necked appearance. Eyes large, iris is lemon yellow with a thin black border. Bill and gape slate black; hidden by bristly feathers. Large feet are feathered to the ends of the toes. Talons slate gray to black. Females are 10-20% larger than males. Juveniles are similar in coloration although their barring and dark markings are not as crisp and defined, throat patch is less extensive and white is not so pure, and ear tufts smaller or not apparent. At least 16 subspecies recognized; 10 of them in North America; 2 in Central America and 4 in South America. Subspecies tend to blend with their habitat in their coloration.

Similar Species

Long-eared owl –

smaller; slimmer; longer ear tufts, cross barred under parts, and different call.

Great gray owl –

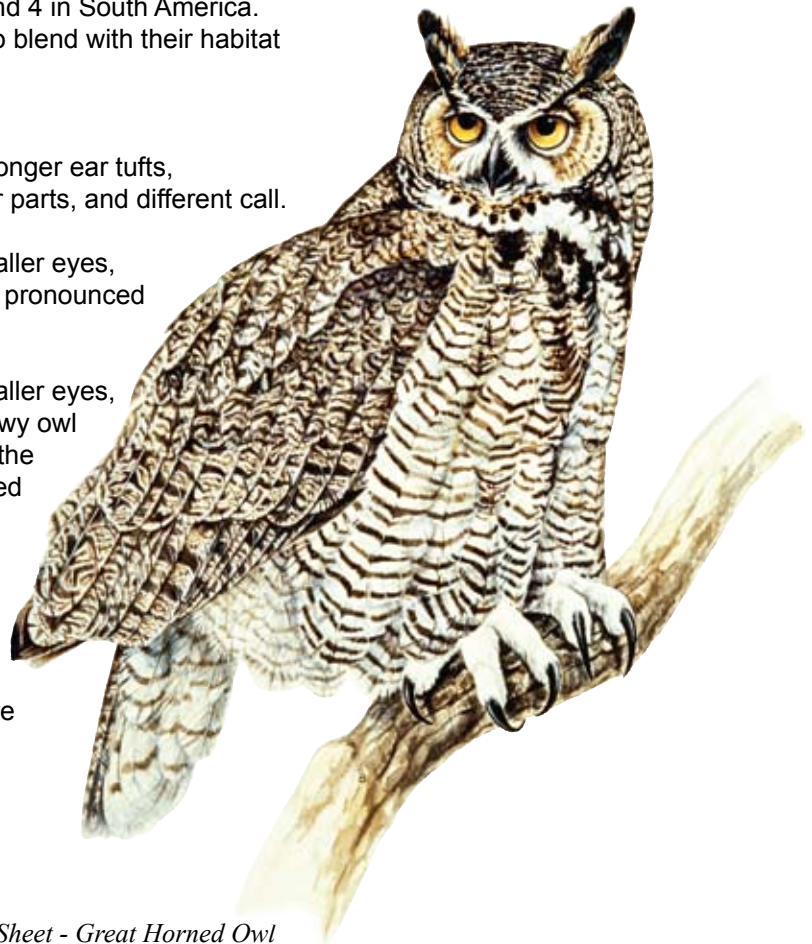
lacks ear tufts, smaller eyes, more rounded and pronounced facial disk.

Snowy owl -

lacks ear tufts, smaller eyes, heavily barred snowy owl can be as dark as the lightest great horned owl.

Barred owl –

smaller, lacks ear tufts, more heavily barred below, higher pitched more rhythmic hoot.



Habitat/Range



Found over most of North and Central America and some of South America. Probably has the most diverse habitat and climatic tolerance of any North American owl. Inhabits every type of terrain from sea level to 11,000 feet. Equally at home in desert, grassland, suburban, agricultural and forest habitats, north to the tree line. If there is a preferred habitat it would include mature deciduous woods with scattered conifers for maximum roosting concealment, that border water with adjacent open habitats for hunting.

Food/Diet

A generalist and opportunistic feeder; the widest prey base of any North American owl. Over much of its range, diet consists of 90% small to medium sized mammals and 10% birds. Also takes a small number of amphibians, reptiles, fish, scorpions, and insects. Feeds on carrion if other food is scarce. Rabbits and hares are its preferred prey. Birds taken fall into three basic categories, waterfowl incubating on nests or roosting on open water at night, birds that roost in the open, or that forage at night (including smaller owls), and nestlings taken at night. Pronounced regional variation in diet. Diet composition may also vary seasonally, or with prey cycles. Pellets are large: 3-4 inches long and 1.5 inches thick; regurgitated 6-10 hours after eating. Skulls as wide as 1.2 inches are regurgitated whole.

Voice

Has a large repertoire of sounds ranging from deep booming hoots to shrill shrieks. Most calling occurs from dusk to about midnight and then again just before dawn. Typical territorial advertisement call consists of 3-6 notes of deep-toned hooting; "who-hoo-ho-oo or who-ho-o-o, whoo-hoo-o-o, whoo". Paired birds often synchronize their territorial advertisement calls, known as duetting. Female calls about 3 seconds; male responds during or within a few seconds after female's call with call also lasting about 3 seconds. Repeated for 10-60 minutes every 15 to 20 seconds. Female voice higher pitched than male. Juveniles call with a screech reminiscent of a Barn owl. Other sounds include shrieks, screams, barks, hisses, catlike meee-owwwwww, soft cooing notes and tremulous wavering cries. Non vocal sounds: Snaps bill vigorously when angry, disturbed, or stressed, or as warning or aggressive sound. May be accompanied by hissing, low screams, raspings, gurgles, and wing-flapping.

Behavior

Flight is powerful and straight, with short periods of wing-flapping alternating with glides. When gliding, holds long broad wings almost horizontally. Walks on ground with a pronounced side-to-side gait. Rapid walking usually accompanied by wing-flapping. Flightless young, once half-grown, can climb trees using feet. Primarily hunts at dusk and during the night from a perch, also flies low over the ground, walks on the ground or wades into water. Prey usually killed instantly when grasped by its large talons which require a force of 185 pounds/inch² to open. May take prey two to three times heavier than itself. Small prey can be swallowed whole while larger prey ripped apart. May return to kill site to finish consuming larger prey. Can store large quantities of prey in nest when food is abundant, particularly during early nestling stage. Highly territorial. Mated pairs occupy territories year-round and long-term; however these owls are solitary, only staying with their mate during the nesting season. Territories are established and maintained through hooting. An appreciable number of adults fail to establish territories and live quietly as nonhooting "floaters" most often at periphery or boundaries of defended territories. No annual migration; most individuals are permanent residents. Irruptions from northern regions; particularly in response to population crashes of snowshoe hare have been documents. Great Horned Owls elicit intense mobbing by crows, ravens, passerines, and other birds. Respond by flying into nearest secluded spot to escape tormenters.



Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 1-4 eggs
Eggs: Elliptical, 2.2" x 1.9", white.
Incubation: 28-35 days
Fledge: 10-11 weeks
Disperse: Families remain loosely associated during summer before young disperse in autumn.

Life Span

Conservation Status

Viewing in the NCA

Interesting Facts

Spanish name:
Búsho cornudo

Sources

Breeding season from December to July depending on latitude. Courtship includes posturing such as bowing, and tail-bobbing; "duetting" (see voice above); and periods of mutual bill-rubbing or preening of feathers. Courting pairs also indulge in high-pitched giggling, screaming, and bill-snapping. Does not build a nest but uses nests of other birds such as hawk, crow and heron; may also use squirrel nests, hollows in trees and snags, crotches or holes in cacti, cliffs, rocky caves, abandoned buildings, or artificial platforms. Will lay eggs on the ground. Most nests are used for only 1 season as often a tree nest deteriorates to almost nothing during a season's use. Members of a pair often remain on same territory year-round. Apparently monogamous. Pairs may mate for life, but if a mate dies, it is quickly replaced. Generally single-brooded; may lay again if nest or first clutch is destroyed early in breeding cycle. Young owls move out of nest onto nearby branches at 6-7 weeks of age. Fully fledge at 10-11 weeks. Fledged owls remain with parents throughout most of summer, who continue to bring them occasional food items. May be seen begging for food into October, 4-5 mo after leaving nest. Sexually mature at two years.

Longest recorded – 27 years 7 months.

Not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the great horned owl as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. Few population estimates available but appears to be widespread, but thinly distributed. In open grasslands, species may be limited by availability of nest trees. High mortality first two years of life. Nestlings die as result of predation, starvation and sometimes siblicide in low prey years. Natural causes also include parasitism and disease. Human caused mortality comes from illegal shooting, trapping, collisions with moving or stationary objects, pesticides, and electrocutions. Secondary poisoning by pesticides accumulated in prey may cause direct death or behavioral changes that may lead to mortality. Only natural enemies for adults are other great horned owls, golden eagles, and occasionally northern goshawks during disputes over nest sites. Adapts remarkably well to habitat change as long as nest sites are available. Remarkably tolerant to nest visits, even early in incubation.

The great horned owl is seen in the NCA year round.

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *bubo* which refers to an owl, and the Latinized name for the state of Virginia where the first specimen was taken for scientific collection.
- Common name refers to the large size of this bird and the feather tufts on its head.
- Other names: Big Hoot Owl, Cat Owl, Horned Owl, King Owl, Winged Tiger.
- One of few species that occasionally preys on skunks.
- Sleeps in a standing position, head hunched into shoulders, eyes closed, ear-tufts back against head. Sleep is light and alert; frequently interrupted to scan surroundings before resuming sleep.

Bird Banding Lab - www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long2890.htm
Idaho Fish&Game - <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/wildlife/nongame/birdspecies.cfm>
National Audubon Society The Sibley Guide to Birds
The Peregrine Fund - www.peregrinefund.org/Explore_Raptors/owls/grethorn.html
Owling.com - http://www.owling.com/Great_Horned.htm
The Owl Pages - www.owlpages.com/species.php?genus=Bubo&species=virginianus
Birds of North America Online - http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/BNA/account/Great_Horned_Owl/
US Fish and Wildlife Service – http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/servlet/gov.doi.tess_public.servlets.VipListed?code=V&listings=0#B

Illustration: courtesy Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Map: The Peregrine Fund
Photography: Thomas C. Dunston