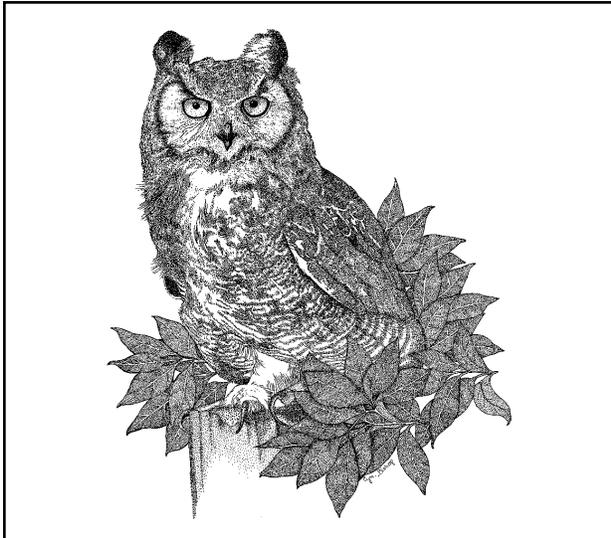
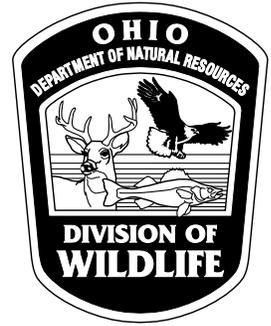


# Great Horned Owl

Scientific Name: *Bubo virginianus*



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## Introduction

The great horned owl is the largest of Ohio's resident owls and the largest "eared" owl in North America. Once abundant in the state, great horned owl numbers have declined with the development of Ohio. This owl will eat a tremendous variety of animals and is a talented hunter; these attributes have allowed it to adapt to nearly all types of habitat where it can find suitable nest sites.

Throughout the world, owls have been associated with a variety of myths and superstitions, good and bad, that run the gamut from being a symbol of witchcraft, evil occurrences, impending death, wisdom, good luck and victory. Many of the stories that have been fabricated around owls likely have their roots in attempts to explain owls' nocturnal behavior and their vocalizations, many of which sound human. The great horned owl has a variety of calls or notes it sounds including a five- or six-note hoot, shrieks, barks, growls, and a scream that sends a chill down many spines.

The great horned owl is considered the top bird of prey, fearing no other creature but man.

## Description

The great horned owl has a mixture of brown and varying shades of black and buff feathers. A considerable number of feathers show white, especially under the chin where there is a conspicuous throat patch. The breast is heavily barred--the variation in feather colors gives the impression of bars running across the body. Two large tufts of longer feathers come off either side of the great horned owl's head. Male and

female great horned owls are identical in appearance, but the female is noticeably larger.

Owl feathers are described as "soft and flexible"; the edges are fringed. This allows owls to fly nearly silently and to approach their prey without warning. Most owls have 12 tail feathers.

The eyes are yellow and highlighted by a black facial rim. They are also very large; and this adaptation helps the owl be an effective predator. The size of its eyes allows the owl to gather sufficient light to permit it to see well and function in low light conditions. The great horned owl has a sharp beak and claws, also excellent aids in hunting prey. Its talons are curved and thick and there is a soft covering of feathers over the toes down to the base of the nails. Its ears are placed on the top sides of its head, and its hearing is acute. The great horned owl's hearing, like that of other owls, picks up the most minute sounds to the point that it can take prey in complete darkness.

Great horned owls are generally 21 to 23 inches in height. Their weight varies greatly, but they can weigh as much as 4.5 pounds. The male's wingspan is 50 to 55 inches and the female's 50 to 62 inches.

Great horned owls have an extensive range--throughout the Americas from the Arctic to the Straits of Magellan, less the West Indies. There are 10 subspecies of great horned owls within this range. Coloration patterns vary somewhat among the subspecies, but their general appearance is consistent with the subspecies found in Ohio. Great horned owls are fairly

common in Ohio, especially in the glaciated portions of the state.

## Habitat and Habits

Great horned owls can be found throughout Ohio, but their primary habitat area is open farmlands where numerous woodlots are interspersed among the agricultural fields. Wooded parks and riparian corridors near openings of heavily forested areas are also used; extensive forested areas are avoided.

Great horned owls are the earliest nesters, but they don't build their own nests. These owls will use the abandoned nests of hawks, eagles, herons, and squirrels; tree dens and cavities may also be used. Large, mature trees are the preferred sites for these nests. When tree nest sites are lacking, great horned owls have been known to use old buildings, cliffs, and even the bare ground. Breeding populations are known to occur in 86 of Ohio's 88 counties and are believed to occur in the remaining two.

Typically the home range of the great horned owl is constant throughout the year; however, this can be influenced significantly by the availability of prey animals. These owls don't migrate in the usual sense of the word, but will relocate to areas with more prey during periods of severe conditions.

The great horned owl prefers live food, but will eat freshly killed prey. This owl's diet is the most widely varied of all North American birds of prey. Its diet ranges from small rodents to house cats, skunks, and beaver; and small songbirds to geese and adult turkeys. Their prey list includes, but is not limited to the previously mentioned species, and: ducks, chickens, pheasants, hawks, grouse, mice, rats, muskrats, eels, rabbits, porcupines, snakes, and skunks.

## Reproduction and Care of the Young

Great horned owls are monogamous, meaning that the pair forms a bond and the male doesn't breed with other females. In Ohio, mating occurs in early January; clutches of three or four white, roundish eggs are laid in late January through late February. Incubation takes about 30 days (this may range from 28 to 35 days) and the eggs generally begin to hatch in late February through March. Incubation of each individual egg begins as it is laid, so hatching dates within the clutch will be staggered. While the female incubates, the male hunts and brings his mate food; he will continue these efforts, bringing food to the owlets when they hatch. If a clutch of eggs is destroyed, the female may attempt to renest.

Owlets open their eyes at one week, and will leave the nest cavity at four to five weeks of age. Young fledge at 10 weeks of age. Once the owlets leave the nest, they typically roost on

a tree branch which they often have to climb to until they become more accomplished fliers. The young great horned owls may stay with their parents for up to a year when they themselves become sexually mature.

## Management Plans

Currently, great horned owl populations within the state appear stable. Although the Division of Wildlife has no active management plan designed specifically for these owls, continued monitoring and evaluation of data and information, as it becomes available, will help ensure that they remain a viable part of our state's woodland-open land ecosystem.

## Viewing Opportunities

Opportunities to view great horned owls are best in farmland areas where numerous woodlots are interspersed by agricultural, particularly pasture and grassland, fields. Because they are primarily nocturnal, the likelihood of hearing a great horned owl is much greater than actually seeing one. They can be lured into viewing range by individuals who, while imitating their call or hoot, are successful in eliciting a territorial response from resident owls.

## Do Something Wild!

The great horned owl is among the majority of wildlife species in Ohio that are not hunted. All of these animals are vital parts of our overall ecosystem and contribute to the wildlife diversity of the state. Helping us manage and study these species are the generous citizens of the state of Ohio. With money they either donated through the state income tax checkoff, by the purchase of wildlife conservation license plates, or their direct contribution to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to purchase critical habitat essential to sustaining many species of wildlife and to implement programs that benefit species like the great horned owl.

Contributions to our wildlife diversity program are accepted throughout the year. To make a contribution, please send a check to: Endangered Species Special Account, Ohio Division of Wildlife, 2045 Morse Road, Bldg. G, Columbus, Ohio 43229-6693. All contributions, whether made on your income tax return or directly, are tax deductible.

## At a Glance

Mating: Monogamous

Peak Breeding Activity: Late January through mid-March

Incubation Period: 28-35 days; 30 days typical. Incubation begins as soon as the first egg laid and ends about 30 days after the last egg is laid.

Young Hatch: Generally beginning in late February through early April

Clutch Size: 3-4 eggs

Young Fledge: At 10 weeks old

Number of Broods per Year: 1

Adult Weight: Male- 2.5-3.5 pounds; female- 3-4.5 pounds

Adult Height: 21-23 inches

Life Expectancy: Approximately 50% of great horned owls hatched will die within the first year of life. Those that survive beyond this period average 6-7 years of life. Oldest reported in the wild was 15 years of age.

Migration Patterns: In the extreme northern portions of its range, the shortage of prey species, which generally occurs in the winter, results in owl movement from those areas to more productive hunting grounds. Provided adequate food supplies are available, migration is minimal.

Typical Foods: Small rodents, small cats, skunks, beaver, songbirds, geese, adult turkeys, chickens, pheasants, grouse, muskrats, snakes, eels, rabbits, porcupines, and squirrels among other animals.

Native to Ohio: Yes

