

Native Range Map



Great Horned Owl

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Aves
Order: Strigiformes
Family: Strigidae
Genus: *Bubo*
Species: *virginianus*



Photo courtesy of Tony Wisneski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** Great horned owls are native to most of North, Central, and South America. They live in a variety of habitats from woodlands and tropical rain forests to grasslands, desert canyons and arctic tundra, preferring open and secondary-growth woodlands with water nearby. They mostly stay in their territory except for the most northern populations which move southward in the fall and winter.
- **Exhibit Location:** Check for current location

Characteristics

- Length: 18-25 inches; Weight: 3-4 pounds; Wingspan: 40-57 inches
- The sexes are alike in plumage; the female is the larger of the two.
- The owl's body is brown and gray with dark barring. There are white feathers that look like a collar against the darker feathers on the body. The ear tufts are set wide apart on the head and resemble horns.
- The facial disk is orange in color with a black vee between the large yellow eyes with black pupils. The eyes are very large in relationship to the owl's size. The facial disk is used to help focus sound to the ears.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 12+ years; **In Captivity** 29 years

Behaviors

- Great horned owls are mostly solitary birds. They are territorial and can be very aggressive.
- Great horned owls' eyes are adapted for nocturnal hunting.
- They hunt primarily at night, perching in trees and waiting for sounds of movement. They will move from tree to tree to get a better fix on the prey. Once they pinpoint the sound, they silently swoop in, spread their talons wide, and pounce on their prey.
- Owls have incredible hearing. Their ears are offset on the head and the openings are slightly tilted in different directions. Soft feathers that surround the opening spread to make a funnel for sound to enter the ear. This enables them to triangulate the position of their prey. By tilting or moving their head until the sound is of equal volume in each ear, the owl can pinpoint the direction and distance of the sound.
- Great horned owls use their ear tufts to convey body language. When they are irritated, the tufts lie flat and when curious, they stand upright.
- The hooting sound of the great horned owls is very distinctive. It is a series of deep hoots, from 3-8 notes long and can be heard a great distance away. The male has a deeper voice. Pairs often call together, with audible difference heard between the two calls. Young make a loud, raspy screech.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** varied diet and training

Reproduction

- Great horned owls do not breed until they are 2 years old.
- Great horned owls lay their eggs in abandoned nests of other large birds in late January or early February. They also use a variety of other nest sites such as cliffs, buildings, and the ground.
- They usually lay 2-3 white eggs once a year. Both parents incubate the eggs for 30-35 days.
- The young are fed by both parents and protected against intruders until they leave the nest at about 45 days of age. If a young owl falls out of the nest prematurely, the adult will feed it on the ground.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** turkeys, rabbits, woodchucks, mice, rats, squirrels, skunks, shrews, muskrats, weasels, pocket gophers, domestic cats, bats, ducks, quail, geese, heron, sparrows, grouse, pheasants, other owls, snakes, beetles, scorpions, frogs, grasshoppers
- **At the zoo:** rats, rabbit

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** LC (Least Concern); **CITES:** not listed
- Great horned owls are common and widespread in their habitat.
- Great horned owls and other birds of prey are given complete protection in most states throughout the United States.
- Predators: none

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The owl's extra soft feathers are very silent, so it is difficult for prey to hear the owl flying at them.
- Owls typically swallow their prey whole. Several hours after eating, the owl's stomach will form a pellet consisting of the fur, hair, exoskeleton and bones that will be regurgitated.
- Great horned owls are the only animal that regularly eats skunks.
- Owls cannot turn their heads completely around. They can rotate their heads 270 degrees, thanks to extra vertebra in their necks. Because their eyes are fixed in their sockets, they can't move their eyes up or down or side to side. The owl has to move its whole head to make up for the fixed eyes.
- Owls have a third, opaque eye membrane, called the nictating membrane. This helps to clean the eye and to protect it from the brightness of the day or foreign objects at night.

Sources:

- Axley, E. 2001. "Bubo virginianus" (on-line), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed December 5, 2005 at http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Bubo_virginianus.html.
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology, (2003). All about birds: great horned owl. Retrieved December 5, 2005, from Cornell Lab of Ornithology Web site: http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Great_horned_owl.dtl.html.
- DesertUSA.com, Great horned owl (bubo virginianus). Retrieved December 5, 2005, from Desert USA Web site: <http://www.desertusa.com/mag00/jan/papr/ghowl.html>.