



# GREAT HORNED OWL

**Strigiformes**  
**Family: Strigidae**  
**Genus: *Bubo***  
**Species: *virginianus***



**Range:** Found from the Arctic tundra to the tropical rainforest, from the desert to suburban backyards, the Great Horned Owl is one of the most widespread and common owls in the Americas.

**Habitat:** Found in a wide variety of habitats, but prefers open and secondary-growth woodlands and agricultural areas. Also in boreal forest, desert, and suburban and urban areas.

**Niche:** Nocturnal, carnivore, arboreal

**Wild diet:** small to medium sized mammals, some bats, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates.

**Zoo diet:**

**Life Span:** (Wild) 13 years  
(Captivity) 29 – 38 years

**Sexual dimorphism:** Females are 10 – 20% larger than the males. The male has a deeper voice.

**Location in SF Zoo:** Children's Zoo – Animal Resource Center, Hawk Hill

---

## APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

---

The Great Horned owl is a large owl recognized by its prominent ear tufts widely spaced on its head. These "plumicorns" resemble horns and are light gray to dark brown feathers. They have horizontal breast barring with gray to brown, mottled bodies. Their face has a dark outline with a lighter brown center and sometimes a white patch on the throat. They have sharp, black talons and beaks. They have large, round gold eyes. There are some differences in coloring of the Great Horned Owls, depending on where they live. Juveniles are like the adults.

**Weight:** 2 – 5.5 lbs

**Length:** 18 – 25 in

**Wingspan:** 3.3 to 4.8 ft

Owls have spectacular binocular vision allowing them to pinpoint prey and see in low light. Their large eyes cannot move and the owl moves their entire head and neck 270 degrees. They have asymmetrical ears, which provide an accurate determination of distance and sound. Owls do not have a crop and swallow their prey whole and later regurgitate pellets composed of bone, fur, and the other unwanted parts of their meal.

---

## STATUS & CONSERVATION

---

Not endangered as populations are robust. CITES II. Widespread but densities are low.

---

## COMMUNICATION AND OTHER BEHAVIOR

---

Pairs often call together, with audible differences in pitch. Their call is a low-pitched but loud *ho-ho-hoo hoo hoo*; sometimes it is only four syllables instead of five. The female's call is higher and rises in pitch at the end of the call. Young owls make hissing or screeching sounds. Most calling occurs from dusk to about midnight and then again just before dawn.

The great horned owl hunts at night, mostly from perches next to open areas. When they spot prey, they dive down to the ground with wings folded. The prey is usually killed instantly when grasped by the owl's large, curved talons.

All mated Great Horned Owls are permanent residents of their territories, but unmated and younger birds move freely in search of company and a territory, and leave regions with little food in winter. They do not migrate but may wander some in search of prey.

---

## COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

---

Monogamous pairs do not make their own nest but typically take over nests of other birds. They will however nest in tree cavities, stumps, and cliffs. They are protective parents and are extremely aggressive when defending the nest and will continue to attack until the intruder is killed or driven off. The male and female both incubate the one to five eggs and the male also hunts for food. The chicks are helpless and covered with white down. Brooding is almost continuous for two weeks after hatching. They fledge from the nest while they still are downy around the head and without noticeable ear tufts.

Incubation: 30 – 37 days	Sexual Maturity: 2 -3 years
# of eggs: 1 - 5	Fledging: 7 weeks

---

## MISCELLANEOUS

---

The Great Horned Owl is the only animal that regularly eats skunks.

### Sources:

Handbook of Birds of the World Vol 5 © 1999 Lynx Edicions, p 185.

<http://www.owlpages.com/>

<http://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/>

Created 8/11