



Great horned owl, photo J. Galetto

Who Gives a Hoot?

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There is an eerie yet alluring duet going on in my yard most evenings now that the weather has become truly wintery. Great horned owls are courting. They are nicknamed the “hoot owl” for their series of calls. Bird vocalizations are often given a phonetic transcription, which helps to approximate them. People use these transcriptions as mnemonic devices to aid in recognizing calls. The phonetic equivalent ascribed by birding experts to the great horned owls is hoo-hoo-

hoooooo-hoo-hoo, which is made by both sexes although the male's voice is lower. They are monogamous in a breeding season and thought to pair for five years and possibly for life (Cornell Lab of Ornithology).

Great horned owls are one of our earliest nesters; they call as they set up house and define territories. For their young they will appropriate the nests of other large birds, such as hawks, crows, herons, and sometimes even squirrels. Producing only one brood a year, after mating they will lay one to four eggs, which are incubated for a little over a month.

Very adaptable, these owls use a diverse array of habitats throughout North America, extending north to the treeline's edge and south to Nicaragua. Rural developments with trees are among their suitable environments; thus, they are one of our more plentiful owl species because of their ability to habituate to man's encroachments.

These are large and powerful birds—18 to 24 inches tall with a wingspan of 40-57 inches. In flight their large wings are nearly silent because of a serrated leading edge and light down present on the bottom edge and on their legs. Once at

night, one swooped about three feet over my head, producing the sensation of air caressing my hair, and I saw it as it flew up and away. It is one of the few times I have felt as if my hair stood on end.

The female is larger than the male, who is more maneuverable and better able to guard the nest in flight. The name “horned” is due to their large ear tufts. Their parabolic- shaped facial discs capture sound and funnel it to their ears, which are placed one slightly higher than the other to echolocate prey. Their nearly human-sized eyes, fixed so that they must move their heads to compensate, capture a lot of light, allowing them to hunt at night. This is when they are primarily active although they are diurnal.

When food is plentiful they can show extreme prey preferences. A few years ago there was an article about a South Jersey park in which rabbits were found with only specific organs removed. Rather than being the work of some weird cult ritual, the culprit was unveiled by a snowfall when the owl left its wing prints alongside its carefully lined-up captures!

Their diet is extremely diverse—all manner of small mammals ranging in size from mice to raccoons, waterfowl, and

raptors. They will eat reptiles, fish, insects, and even house cats, another great reason to keep your felines indoors. I once read that a National Park visitor wearing a coonskin cap was killed by a great horned owl as its talons penetrated his skull. One more reason my hair stood on end!

Our osprey do not like raising their broods near treelines, so CU Maurice River places nesting platforms a good distance from them, where osprey have a clear 180-degree view. We suspected that treelines presented issues for osprey because of great horned owl predation. It wasn't until a bird camera at Terrapin Cove in Dorchester caught an owl stealing a chick that our fears were verified. This theft can be seen on our website: cumauriceriver.org/osprey (the video is linked to a photo at the bottom of the page).

Crows are known to mob owls. If you are in the woods you might get a good look at one by following the sounds of corvids making a fuss. Crows are basically trying to get an upper hand by bullying, but their ruckus also acts as a good alarm system.

Although Cornell reports a 33 percent great horned owl decline throughout their range from 1966 to 2015, Cumberland

County remains a national stronghold for the species. One of their greatest threats remains secondary unintended poisoning from eating rodents that are killed by toxic substances, lead-laden carrion, and other prey species whose tissues contain contaminants. Because of their wide choice of prey, people will also kill them illegally. Great horned owls' fierce reputation doesn't always win them fans. But they are a majestic raptor that demands attention, they play a vital role in keeping certain populations in check, and they remain one of our most amazing avian marvels.