

NATURE DETECTIVES

Winter 2003

Wise as an Owl

Successful nature detectives are good at quiet watching. Taking a clue from the behavior of our resident great horned owls, we might all become better nature detectives. As this early American rhyme points out...

A wise old owl sat in an oak,
And the more he sat, the less he spoke,
And the less he spoke, the more he heard.
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?
(Author unknown)

Maybe Not Exactly Wise...

Owls may teach us to be watchful nature detectives but are they wise birds? Looking beyond first impressions, scientists discover that many old beliefs about animals are only partly true or are not true at all. Some old sayings are based on animal appearances rather than animal behaviors.

Owls have faces that remind us of human faces. Like people, they have large round heads with big forward-facing eyes. Their curved beaks look a little like human noses. When we see them sitting quietly, staring around like wise old men, we start thinking owls must be wise too.

Truth is, scientists have found that crows and jays act smarter than owls. But nobody says you are "wise as a crow." Someone might say you are "silly as a goose." They'd be wrong. Geese do look a little silly when they walk, but they are actually pretty smart birds.

Here are some other common comparisons. See if you can fill in the blank. Do you think they are true, sometimes true, or never true? Can you think of other animal comparisons?

Quiet as a _____
Sly as a _____
Hungry as a _____
Happy as a _____

Busy as a _____
Mad as a _____
Harmless as a _____
Blind as a _____

(mouse, fox, bear, clam or lark, bee or beaver, hornet, flea, bat)

GREAT HORNED OWL



Great Horned Owl — Whoo Goes There

In city park or deep forest, on grassy plains or shrubby hillsides, there is likely to be a great horned owl. They are mostly active after dark, and seeing one is not easy. During the day, they often sit on a high branch, camouflaged against the trunk of the tree. They stand up tall, pull their feathers in close to their bodies, straighten their feather "horns" (which are neither ears nor horns) and close their eyes. With their feathers looking like shadowed tree bark, they virtually disappear. Only if the owl opens its eyes or gets spotted by a mob of cawing crows will we probably see it.

We have a better chance of hearing great horned owls. All during the year they call to each other to keep track of babies or announce territory ownership. Once December arrives, the calling gets much more frequent as owls prepare for the important task of becoming parents. Listen for the deep "whoo, whoo-hoo" calls of the male and female hooting to each other in early winter. The sound can be heard a long way on a still night. Owls make other sounds besides hooting. They have sounds like barks, raspy growls, laughter, and even shrieks and wails. Up close, a great horned owl may snap and click its beak or hiss to warn away possible enemies.

Tiger of the Sky

Great horned owls are named "great" because they are big. The males stand 18 to 25 inches tall and the females are even bigger, to 33 inches tall. Other than size, the males and females look alike. They weigh three to five pounds, but fluffy feathers make them look heavier. Their toes are feathered down to the long curved claws. Various shades of brown, gray and white color their feathers. The disk-shaped feathers around their eyes may have bits of reddish-orange. The dark stripes across their chests, along with their big yellow eyes, give them the nickname "tiger of the sky."

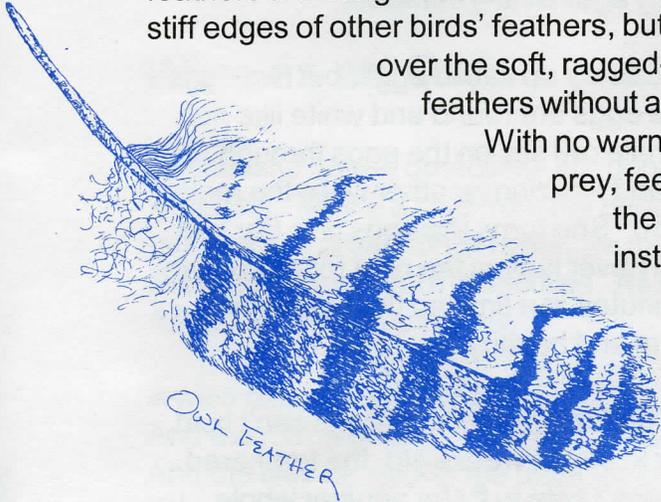


Just as cats flatten their ears when they are mad, a great horned owl can raise or flatten the tufts of feathers on top its head to reflect its mood. These feather tufts, sticking straight up like horns, give great horned owls the second part of their name.

An owl's eyes always stare fiercely ahead because owls cannot move their eyes as we do. To make up for their fixed-in-place eyeballs, their heads turn an amazing distance. Owls can turn their heads to look directly behind them, or they can turn their heads almost upside down to bring something into better focus. Special bones in their necks give them this extra range of movement. They can turn their heads so fast, some people mistakenly thought the owls were spinning their heads around in a complete circle.

Dangerous Feathers Deadly Talons

Owl feathers look soft and cuddly, but looks are deceiving. To prey animals, soft feathers are dangerous! Air whistles over the stiff edges of other birds' feathers, but air passes over the soft, ragged-edged owl feathers without a "whoosh."



With no warning sound, the great horned owl dives toward its clueless prey, feet first, hitting hard with talons spread apart. On contact, the owl closes its talons like eight deadly sharp knives, instantly killing its quarry.

Clutching the dead animal in one foot, the owl uses its large wings to fly to its favorite eating roost. If the prey is a mouse, the owl swallows it whole, headfirst. If the prey is a rabbit, the owl uses its sharp curved beak to tear off chunks of meat.

Owls don't see well up close, so the owl uses the sensitive stiff feathers around its beak like cat whiskers to help it sense where to bite.

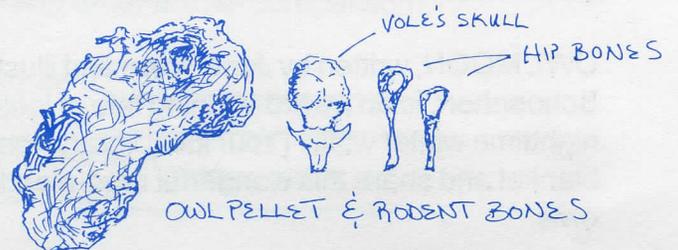
In daylight, owls see little better than we do at a distance, except colors look mostly like shades of gray to owls. After dark, owls see much better than people. The dim light from stars provides enough light for owls to see very well. Owls bob their heads to get slightly different views, a useful trick for judging how far away things are.

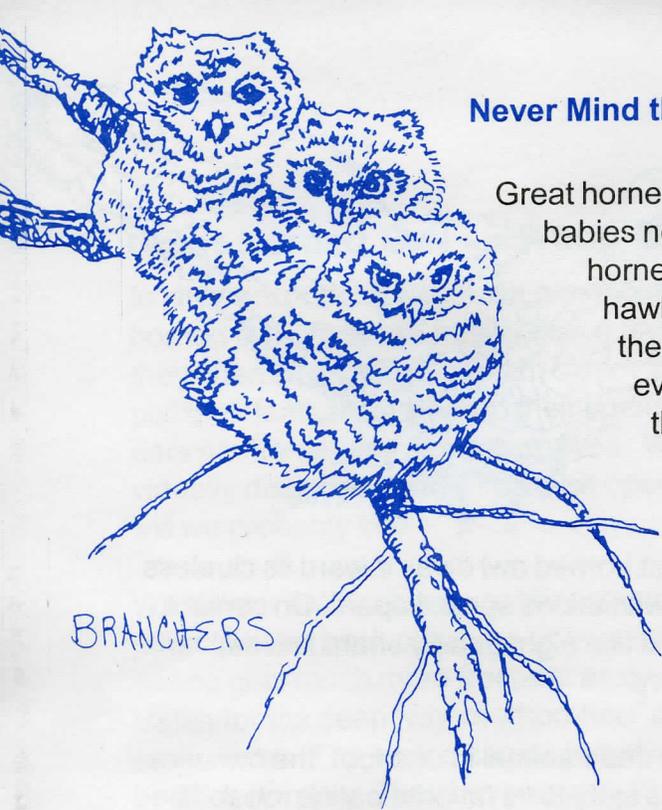
With the largest eardrums of any bird, owls have great hearing. The ears are in slits located at the sides of the disk of feathers on the owl's face. One slit is slightly higher than the other. Since owls fly silently, hunting means listening as much as seeing. Using sound alone, owls can find mice under snow or leaves.

Munch a Skunk Or Anything Else

Great horned owls will eat about any prey they can find. They eat bugs, birds, rodents, snakes, bats, cats, and even things already dead alongside the road. Because they have little sense of smell, they find skunks savory too. They hunt and eat every day.

Meat, fat, and skin get digested in the owl's gut. Bone, teeth, fur, and feathers swallowed along with the meat get wadded into pellets. The owl belches up the three-inch, gray pellets several hours after every meal. Usually great horned owls hunt from sundown to sunup, but sometimes they hunt during the day, especially if they have hungry youngsters to feed.





Never Mind the Snow, Lay an Egg

Great horned owls lay eggs early in the new year because their babies need a long time to develop into full-grown adults. Great horned owls don't build their own nests. They look for an old hawk, crow, magpie, or eagle nest. If they can't find one, they might lay their eggs in a hollow tree, or on a cliff, or even on the ground. They don't fix up the nest site, but they defend it fiercely against any intruders.

The female owl can lay up to five eggs, but two eggs are typical. The eggs are round and white like golf balls. The female owl sits on the eggs through snowstorms and freezing weather while the male brings her food. She turns the eggs with her feet and beak, and never leaves the nest for more than two or three minutes at a time so the developing babies stay warm and healthy.

After about a month, the babies break out of their shells. The fuzzy white hatchlings can't hold up their heads or open their eyes. By the time they are six to seven weeks old, the feathered owlets usually manage to tumble out of the nest, but they aren't able to fly for another whole month. These non-flying owlets are called branchers because they use their beaks and talons to pull themselves up on bushes and tree branches where they walk around begging their parents for food. After they learn to fly, the parents still feed their demanding offspring into autumn. When they are almost a year old, the young owls finally fly off to find their own territory.

Survival

Because great horned owls are not picky about what they eat or where they live, they are surviving well in many places. Some live nearly twenty years. Others die because they cannot find enough food. A number of owls fly into electrical wires, collide with cars, or are shot. Owls help us by keeping rats, mice, skunks, and other animals from getting too numerous. It is against the law to harm an owl.

Birds-Eye Views

Click on the Xcel Energy web cam to view an owl nest. Last winter a pair of great horned owls nested on the platform. If they come back this year, you can watch the owls raise a new family, perhaps.

Web address: www.Xcelenergy.com.

Click on *Bird Cam 2003*, then click on *Owl Cam*.

OWL MOON, written by Jane Yolen and illustrated by John Schoenherr, is an award-winning tale of looking for owls on a nighttime winter walk. (Your local library has it.) Curl up under a blanket and share this wonderful read-aloud view of great horned owls.