



# Birds of Barrington:

## GREAT HORNED OWL

SHOULD YOU BE OUT at dusk on brisk November and December days, especially near a woodland, you might well hear the hu-hu-hu-WHO! WHO! of the great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*). The owl is one of our fiercest local predators, and the largest of the owl family in the Barrington area.

Countless times have I stood in the grassland at Cook County’s Spring Creek Preserve, as the light is fading, and thrilled at the deep-toned

hoots coming from the woods on the slope. Usually there is a duet: the male hoots his notes, then the female counters in the same cadence, but at a slightly higher pitch. The stillness of twilight, the chill in the air seem to amplify the serenade. For me, it’s one of the most moving aural experiences nature has to offer.

It is more difficult to see great horned owls than to hear them. They are nocturnal creatures, winging their silent way in darkness through woodlands and over fields in search of prey. Most sightings come by surprise, for instance, when you might flush an owl from beside a driveway where it has paused to grab a rodent. The owls roost during the day, blending extraordinarily well into their surroundings. Should you happen to approach a tree where one is perched, it is apt to fly off and catch your attention with its sudden exit, though usually it disappears from view just as suddenly. Another clue to an owl’s perch is a band of crows noisily “mobbing” the predator.

Great horned owls live in the Barrington area year ‘round. They do not make their own nests, but rather use large nests of branches fashioned by other birds—red-tailed hawks or crows or Cooper’s hawks—or nest in large tree cavities. Unlike for most birds in our area, winter is breeding



season for the owls. As we prepare for the holidays, great horned owls are courting, mating, and soon will be incubating eggs.

Eggs number usually two, sometimes three, and the chicks hatch in late winter or early spring. Both parents are conscientious providers and feed the chicks a steady diet of rodents, rabbits, skunks, other birds—whatever they can get their enormous talons on. They have the most varied palate of all raptors.

The “horns” of the great horned owl are not horns nor ears, but rather ear tufts—feathered projectiles with the appearance of horns. The ears, as with all owls, are tucked behind its cinnamon-colored facial discs where they receive sound with far greater sensitivity than most in the animal kingdom. But with mice, voles, and other small rodents forming a large part of the owl’s diet, acute hearing to detect little mouse feet is essential, as is keen eyesight to locate the prey.

With days growing shorter and colder, it often takes firm resolve for an outing to a local woodland or forest preserve at twilight. But it is always worth the effort. It is a special treat to experience the end of day, feel the fading light, hear the twitter of songbirds diving into thickets to roost for the night. And who knows, you just might catch the deep, haunting tones of a great horned owl hooting to its mate.

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