

Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus*



Folk Name: Horned Owl, Cat Owl, Hoot Owl
Status: Resident
Abundance: Uncommon
Habitat: Upland forests with adjacent fields, often nests in pines

The Great Horned Owl is one of our most powerful predatory birds. Many superlatives, both deserved and undeserved, have been applied to this spectacular bird:

“The largest and fiercest of our owls.”

“Most destructive bird to game on the North American continent.”

“[M]ost rapacious of American birds.”

“Tiger of the air.”

“[A] capable and relentless bird of prey.”

“Of owls, he is the unabridged edition. He looks fiercer, flies farther and hoots louder than any of the others. He is a king who rules by might alone; for, among all the animals that climb or creep, or birds that run or fly, he has no friends.”

The Great Horned Owl is our largest resident owl. It averages 22 inches long, and it can have a wingspan of more than 4 ½ feet. It is the most widely distributed owl in America.

Great Horned Owls do not have horns, but they do have very prominent, uplifted ear tufts made of feathers. These feathered “horns,” their yellow and black eyes, their *hoo hoo hoot-hoot-hoot* call, their hunting ability, and their nocturnal nature, have each combined to make the Great Horned Owl a creature of legend.

These owls have alternately frightened and fascinated people in the Carolina Piedmont since the time of European settlement. Scores of Carolina tales and superstitions involve the Great Horned Owl. Unfortunately, this owl was also well known for preying on chickens and livestock in farm yards, and they were regularly shot on sight:

“E.A. Vogler, Esq., of this place, shot an unusually large ‘horned owl’ in the immediate vicinity of town. His owlship had depredated upon the poultry yard of some of our citizens, and consequently suffered the penalty of the law in such case made and provided.” — *The People’s Press*, Winston-Salem, November 25, 1870



“Mr. Geo. Reading killed a horned owl a few days ago that measured fifty-four inches from tip to tip. It was said to have been the largest owl ever killed in our community.” — *The Standard*, Concord, May 23, 1901

An owl found in a Charlotte chicken house was killed on October 22, 1929:

“Mr. Oehler did not kill the owl himself but Mel Alexander, who works for him looked out the window of his house and saw the bird inside the chicken roost. He seized his shotgun and without troubling to open the window shot in the general direction of the chicken roost, killing the owl without wounding one of the chickens.” — *The Charlotte Observer*, October 24, 1929

Walton R. Smith shot a Great Horned Owl in the Town of Huntersville in Mecklenburg County in April 1931 and mailed it to the North Carolina State Museum for their collections.

In October 1969, a Gaston County preacher shot one after it swooped down on him and flew off with his red hunter’s cap while the man was target shooting:

For a moment he stood, and looked among the tall trees where he could see the brightness of the red color distinctly mark the owl’s presence. With a purpose in mind that can only be guessed at, the owl swooped out and at him again. The preacher stood his ground and this time the target was not the paper one with circles, but the owl. The .410 came up quickly and again the morning’s stillness reverberated with the loud report. The owl, cap still in its long talons, fell to the ground only a few feet away.

Great Horned Owls are known to occasionally strike people on their head in this manner during their “hormone-driven” courtship, pair formation, and copulation phase—which in this region is in September, October, and November.

In addition to being shot, Great Horned Owls were often captured and kept as pets. One owl captured in Charlotte in October 1883 was given to the staff at *The Charlotte Observer*: “Mr. A.A. Garrison has presented *The Observer* with a monstrous big horned owl, which now smiles upon visitors from its cage in our front window.” In May 1894, a pair of “nestling” owls were mailed as a present for an art teacher in Charlotte: “[Miss Eleanor Long] was greatly surprised and a little frightened yesterday when she opened a good sized paper box from Davidson College and found in it a pair of half-grown, horned owls!” One owl was on display in a store in Cabarrus County in February 1901: “Mr. George Richmond has a fine specimen of horned owl at Mr. J.P. Allison’s store, but he’s snappy and as cross as some people who need liver regulator.” And one was on display at a store in Iredell County in 1914: “A big ‘horned owl,’ captured in ‘the jungles of Iredell,’ is on exhibition at the store of the Polk Gray drug company. He measures four and a half feet from tip to tip...he enjoys fresh meat ‘immensely.’”

One Great Horned Owl was even “arrested” in Charlotte, on May 3, 1901:

At 1 o’clock this morning, Sergeant Baker made an interesting capture on Church Street, in rear of The Observer office, his victim being a large horned

owl. The owl was standing in the street when Baker came up. As he approached it tried to run away, but was overtaken. Baker discovered that the bird’s wing was broken, and it is supposed that the owl was flying across the city when it came in contact with a wire and received the injury.

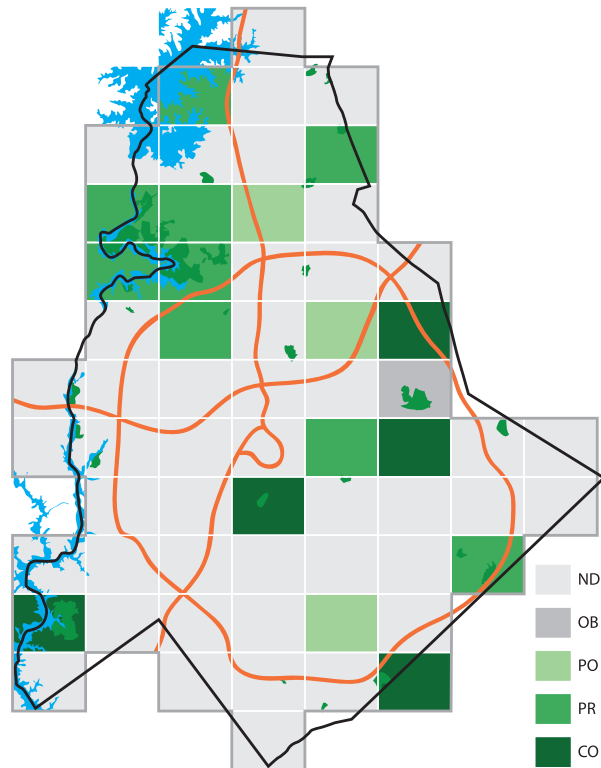
The account was written up in the news as “A Curious Arrest,” and, later, the owl was given to Osmond Barringer to keep as a pet.

Two owls were bought as pets by the Charlotte Country Club at the turn of the twentieth century: “the Country Club bought, for \$2, two elegant horned owls, and has kept the birds at an expense of \$3 worth of raw beef each month. The owls never holler and never hoot, though they are in a position where they can daily see the amateurs play golf. ...They are charming additions to the social life of the club.”

In recent years, there have been many additional examples of man’s impact on these birds. In its first 35 years of operation (1980–2015), the Carolina Raptor Center admitted over 1,450 Great Horned Owls for treatment with an average of more than 40 birds per year. These owls were admitted for a variety of injuries including: electrocution, entanglement, hit by car, fell from nest, starvation, leg hold trap, orphaned, barbed wire, window collision, poisoned, disease, and, of course, trapped in chicken coop, gunshot, and kept as pet.



Young Great Horned Owl in early April in Charlotte.
(Jim Guyton)



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/9, CO/5)

Thankfully, despite decades of both intentional and unintentional harm caused by man, Great Horned Owls have continued to breed and thrive throughout this region. They do not generally build their own nest. Instead, they usually usurp an old nest of another bird, like a crow or hawk. In Iredell County in the 1930s, Maurice Stimson observed one Great Horned Owl use the same nest for seven consecutive years. These owls are our first birds to nest each year, and eggs can be laid as early as December. Eggs usually hatch in late January to late February, and young generally fledge in early April or May.

For food, Great Horned Owls rely on small mammals like rats, rabbits, and mice about 80% of the time and many types of birds, including ducks and other owls, about 15% of the time. However, they have been known to occasionally take free-roaming cats, large snakes like black racers and black rat snakes, and they are one of the few predators of skunks. At times, museum specimens of these owls retain a slight skunk odor for many decades after the bird had been killed.

Mecklenburg County BBA volunteers discovered multiple Great Horned Owl nests during the study. George Andrews observed crows mobbing something at Colonel Francis Beatty Park in Matthews on May 8, 2013. When he looked closer, he saw a Great Horned Owl fledgling lying flat, “sprawled out on a limb” that “looked dead.” A departing crow took a final dive at the bird, and it never moved. While he was photographing the young bird, it slowly retracted its splayed wings and resumed a normal upright posture—having successfully avoided the dangerous intruders.

One nest was discovered in one of the most active playing areas at Reedy Creek Park in Charlotte in early

2015. The nest was situated in a tall pine tree above the sand volleyball court which was surrounded on four sides by a parking lot, basketball court, baseball field, and playground. This bird could not have chosen a busier spot in this park. This was also a location with lots of litter and perhaps lots of rodents running around at night for use as food. One of two young in the nest either fell or was pushed out during the first week of April. It was treated at the Raptor Center and was later returned to the nest. The pair successfully fledged young for at least two years at this location.

Note: Thanks to Dr. Dave Scott at the Carolina Raptor Center who shared the center’s data regarding young birds and the dates they arrived at the center for care.



Adult and nestling at Colonel Francis Beatty Park in Matthews. (Phil Fowler)