

### **Bird Notes by Rick Pyeritz**

“My musical friend, at whose house I am now visiting,  
has tried all the owls that are his near neighbors with a  
pitch pipe and finds they all hoot in B-flat.  
He will examine the nightingales next spring.”

### **The Natural History of Selbourne by Gilbert White**



Get out your pitch-pipes, for this is an excellent time of year to listen for the largest owl of southeastern North America, the Great-Horned Owl, *Bubo virginianus*. Bird activities such as establishing territories, breeding, and raising young have ceased for the year with the exception of the “Hoot Owl.” This bird is just getting started.

The Great-Horned Owl is found from the northern tree limit in Canada to southern South America. In many parts of North America, the Great-Horned Owl occupies the same territory and hunts similar prey as the Red-tailed Hawk, usually taking over the hawk’s nest in late fall. It will not build a nest itself and makes few repairs to the nest it occupies. This is quite a nice arrangement since the hawk hunts by day and nests in the spring while the owl hunts by night and nests in the fall. The Horned Owl can be found living in close proximity to many birds of prey except other owls. It will not tolerate other species of owls in its territory and uses its size and ferocity to drive them away. Horned Owls are usually sedentary, meaning that they will not stray far away from their territory during the year. If you hear an owl in a particular location one year, chances are very good it will stay in the same area for years after.

Like most owls, the Great-Horned is active after sunset, a fact eloquently recorded by Audubon:

“It is during the placid serenity of a beautiful summer night, when the current of the waters moves silently along, reflecting from its smooth surface the silver radiance of the moon, and when all else of animated nature seems sunk in repose, that the Great-Horned Owl, one of the Nimrods of the feathered tribes of our forests, may be seen sailing silently and yet rapidly on, intent on the destruction of the objects destined to form its food.”

### **Birds of America by John James Audubon**

Several anatomic attributes help the owl become an efficient predator. Asymmetrically placed ears on the owl’s head enable it to locate moving prey by sound, even while in total darkness. Sharp eyes and talons assist in hunting small mammals. A special adaption to the owl’s wing feathers ensures silent flight. Comb-like projections on the leading edge of the primary flight

feathers, and a downy-like character to the trailing edge of the primaries, muffle the sound of the approaching owl. The tally for seven nights of hunting by a male Great-horned in Wisconsin, averaging four hours of observation per night, came to 17 rabbits, 10 mice, 6 small rodents, 1 skunk, and 1 squirrel.

The deeply resonant “who-hoo-hoo-o-o” of the male in the early evening or predawn hours broadcasts his defense of a territory this time of year. The call is also recognized by the mnemonic, “Who’s –asleep--me-too.” Even though the female is larger, its call is more high-pitched because of a relatively smaller syrinx. Less commonly heard, but unforgettable, is its blood-curdling scream. Hearing it one night in the woods of the Great Smokies caused my hair to stand on end.

The Cherokee knew the Great-Horned Owl by the name, *tskĩlĩ*, which signifies a witch. According to James Mooney, the respected recorder of Cherokee myth and life, owls and other night-crying birds were believed to be embodied ghosts or disguised witches, and their cry was dreaded as a sound of an evil omen.

Also commenting on the Great-Horned’s voice in her book, *Birdcraft*, was Mabel Osgood Wright, one of the first three women to become members of the American Ornithologists Union.

“Icicles often hang from its nest; and ice still locks the streams as it sweeps about, suggesting every form of dark emotion by its voice, --- mocking laughter, despair, and a choking rattle, --- until you feel that the Wild Huntsman may be galloping through the shadows, blowing his fatal horn.”

***Birdcraft by Mable Osgood Wright***

Ms. Wright also seemed to comment on the Great Horned’s character, writing in her book the following observation:

“I have known one to kill and decapitate three turkeys and several hens in a single night, leaving the bodies uninjured and fit for the table. This savage owl also destroys vast quantities of large game birds and may be safely considered undesirable from the standpoint of the small farmer, however much it may aid the tiller of vast fields by its destruction of vermin.”

One of my most enjoyable birding moments was watching a Great Horned Owl being chased by a long string of Jays and Crow from a woodlot at the University of Delaware into the neighboring fields where the local roving bands of Grackles and Blackbirds chased it back to woodlot where the gathered Jays and Crows chased it back to the fields. This cycle was repeated three times until the owl finally eluded the birds in the woods.

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