

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

GREAT HORNED OWL

Many of us go through our entire lives without seeing an owl. Secretive and nocturnal, these charismatic birds live outside the realm of human observation. However, during the past several weeks, a pair of Great Horned Owls has been hooting before dusk in Victoria Gardens, and several lucky residents have even seen these large predators perched in the tops of trees. I was fortunate enough to be able to get the best photos I've ever gotten of one these magnificent raptors.

The Great Horned Owl is one of 5 species of owls native to Florida, and is one of our country's most widespread birds. But it's not encountered in our state as often as the slightly smaller Barred Owl, which is Florida's most abundant owl. Barred Owls thrive in our state's

swamps, lowland forests, and along our river shoreline forests, while Great Horned Owls prefer the drier oak-pine woodlands. Although both species of owls “hoot” to communicate, they sound quite different: a loud, clear “Who Cooks For You; Who Cooks For Youawwl” for the Barred Owl and a deep, muffled, quicker “Hoo -Hoo-Hoo, Hoo-Hoo” for the Great Horned.

The Great Horned Owl is one of our continent’s largest owls, exceeded in body measurement (but not weight) by the Great Gray Owl of the far north, and in weight by the Snowy Owl of the Arctic (I was lucky enough to actually see a Snowy Owl a few years ago on beach dunes near Jacksonville, FL — one of the few that ever migrated down this far from Canada for winter). The Great Horned is also one of our most powerful birds of prey, known to evict even bald eagles from their nests (it takes over other nests rather than making its own), and taking prey as large as skunks and wild turkeys.

The talons of one of these owls are extremely long, sharp, and strong.

Its yellow eyes and “horns” (tufts of feathers that stick out on top of the head) make this owl easy to distinguish from the darker Barred Owl, which lacks ear tufts and has dark brown eyes. Both species can be heard in Victoria Park, but to actually see one is a rare, memorable occasion.