Why Wildlife Matters: Something To Hoot About – The Great Horned Owl

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Fall 2026 Newsletter

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As autumn settles over Massachusetts, an unmistakable sound begins to echo through our forests. The deep, resonant hoots of the great horned owl (Bubo virginianus) signal the beginning of one of the earliest breeding seasons of any bird in the Commonwealth. While many of our native birds are migrating south and other wildlife is preparing for winter, great horned owls are renewing pair bonds, establishing territories, and preparing to raise their young.

By February, many pairs are already incubating eggs, and by March, some of our forests are home to newly hatched owlets. These remarkable birds begin raising their families when temperatures are often below freezing and snow may still cover the ground.

The remarkable predator whose breeding season begins; While winter still holds Massachusetts in its grip.

A familiar resident of Massachusetts

The great horned owl is one of North America's largest and most powerful owls and a year-round resident of Massachusetts. It occurs throughout much of the Commonwealth, from the Berkshire forests to the woodlands and coastal habitats of Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard.

Great horned owls are highly adaptable and occupy a remarkable variety of habitats. They can be found in deciduous and coniferous forests, wooded wetlands, agricultural landscapes, coastal woodlands and even suburban neighborhoods. They generally favor areas where trees provide suitable nesting and roosting sites and nearby open habitats offer hunting opportunities; they often prefer to nest near water.

Built for life as a predator

With piercing yellow eyes, prominent feathered ear tufts, and beautifully mottled brown, gray and buff plumage, great horned owls are unmistakable. Adults typically measure 18–24 inches in length, with wingspans that can approach five feet. Females are generally larger and heavier than males.

Despite their appearance, the prominent tufts atop their heads are not ears. Their actual ear openings are concealed beneath facial feathers. Their exceptional hearing, excellent low-light vision and nearly silent flight make them formidable hunters. **Their powerful talons** allow them to capture prey ranging from small rodents to rabbits, skunks and other birds. Great horned owls are primarily nocturnal, although they may also hunt during daylight hours.

Love begins when it's cold outside

For great horned owls, courtship begins long before most people associate wildlife with spring. During autumn and early winter, pairs become increasingly vocal. Their characteristic hooting serves to advertise territories, communicate between mates, and reinforce pair bonds.

Great horned owls may maintain long-term pair bonds, and established pairs often remain in the same general territory year after year. Courtship includes vocal duets, displays, and food offerings from males to females.

Unlike many other birds, great horned owls do not construct elaborate nests of their own. Instead, they frequently occupy existing stick nests built by red-tailed hawks, crows, ravens, and other large birds. They may also nest in broken tree trunks, large cavities, cliff ledges, and occasionally artificial nesting platforms.

Great horned owls are among the earliest nesting birds in Massachusetts. Egg laying commonly occurs from late winter into early spring, although some pairs begin earlier. Females generally lay two eggs and begin incubating with the first egg. Incubation lasts approximately one month, during which the male provides food. It's not unusual in northern parts of their range for a female owl to be incubating under snow cover!

By March, some pairs are caring for newly hatched owlets. The young are initially helpless and covered in soft down, relying entirely on their parents for warmth, protection, and food. They begin moving onto nearby branches at approximately six weeks of age, often before they can fly well. Even after leaving the nest, young owls remain dependent on their parents for several months.

Why great horned owls matter

As top avian predators, great horned owls play an important role in maintaining ecological balance. Their diverse diet includes mice, voles, rats, squirrels, rabbits, birds and occasionally reptiles and amphibians.

By consuming rodents and other small mammals, they contribute to the natural regulation of prey populations. Their presence is part of a functioning food web, connecting forests, grasslands, wetlands and suburban environments.

Great horned owls also influence other wildlife through predation and competition. They may prey on other raptors, including smaller owl species, demonstrating the complexity of relationships within healthy ecosystems. Although they are adaptable birds, their success still depends on suitable habitat, adequate prey and safe places to raise their young.

Threats to great horned owls

Despite their strength and adaptability, great horned owls face significant human-related threats.

A particularly serious threat is first and secondary rodenticide poisoning. When an owl consumes a rodent that has ingested anticoagulant poison, it can also ingest the toxin. These chemicals interfere with normal blood clotting and can cause internal hemorrhaging and death. Rodenticide exposure has been documented widely in Massachusetts birds of prey.

Vehicle collisions are another danger. Owls hunting along roadsides may fly low across traffic or become distracted while pursuing prey. Collisions can result in fractures, head trauma, eye injuries, and other life-threatening conditions. Entanglement in discarded fishing line, netting, and fencing also poses risks to raptors. Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza has also impacted Great Horned Owl populations in Massachusetts since 2022.

Habitat loss and disturbance during the breeding season present additional challenges. Removing a tree containing an active nest can destroy eggs or kill young owlets. Even work near an occupied nest can disrupt parental care.

Before you cut that tree, look for owls!

Winter is generally a good time to undertake tree removal because many songbirds have finished nesting. However, great horned owls are an important exception.

By late autumn and early winter, pairs may already be investigating potential nesting sites. In Massachusetts, nesting activity can begin before February, and eggs and young may be present well into spring.

Homeowners, arborists and land managers should carefully inspect trees before undertaking removal, particularly mature white pines, pitch pines and other trees containing large stick nests. An apparently abandoned hawk or crow nest may become an owl's nursery during winter.

Listen for territorial hooting, observe whether owls are regularly visiting a particular tree, and watch for signs of nesting activity from a respectful distance. Remember that an owl sitting motionless on a nest can be remarkably difficult to detect.

Fall and early winter can be useful periods for scheduling necessary tree work, but no season guarantees that a tree is free of nesting wildlife. In December and January, owls may be courting, selecting nest sites or already nesting. In February and March, eggs or newly hatched owlets may be present. Through spring, young owls may still occupy nests or nearby branches and depend on their parents.

If an active nest is discovered, postpone nonemergency work and consult a qualified wildlife professional. Great horned owls, their eggs and young are protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

A young owl found perched on a low branch or even on the ground is not necessarily orphaned. Great horned owl youngsters often leave the nest before they can fly proficiently, and their parents may continue feeding them nearby. If a young owl appears injured or is in immediate danger, contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator before intervening.

What can we do to protect great horned owls?

Protecting these remarkable birds begins with protecting the habitats and food webs they depend upon. Preserving mature trees, wooded corridors, and natural hunting areas provides essential nesting and foraging opportunities.

Avoiding rodenticides is another important step. Homeowners and businesses can reduce rodent problems by securing garbage, eliminating accessible food sources, sealing building entry points, and choosing nonpoisonous pest-management methods. These practices help protect owls and other predators from secondary poisoning.

We can also make our landscapes safer by removing discarded fishing line and hazardous netting, reducing unnecessary disturbance around nesting sites, and exercising caution when driving through wildlife habitat after dark.

Finally, we can help by educating our communities. Sharing information about early owl nesting, responsible tree removal, and the dangers of rodenticides can prevent injuries and save lives.

Protecting the next generation

As autumn evenings grow colder, take a moment to listen for the deep, unmistakable hooting of a great horned owl. Somewhere in a nearby forest, a pair may already be preparing for the demanding task of raising a family through the coldest months of the year.

These magnificent predators are an essential part of Massachusetts' natural heritage. By protecting their habitat, preserving nesting trees, and reducing preventable human-caused threats, we can help ensure that their haunting calls continue to echo through our forests for generations to come.



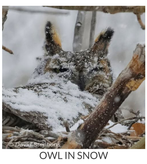
TWO COLOR EYES



GREAT HORNED OWL



GREAT HORNED OWL IN FLIGHT



OWL IN SNOW



CHICK



FLEDGLING OWL

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WE PROVIDE A MAP OF MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS BY THE TYPE OF ANIMALS THEY TAKE – MAMMALS, BIRDS AND REPTILES. FIND A WILDLIFE REHABILITATOR NEAR YOU

FOUND ORPHANED OR INJURED WILDLIFE?

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