

Great Horned Owl

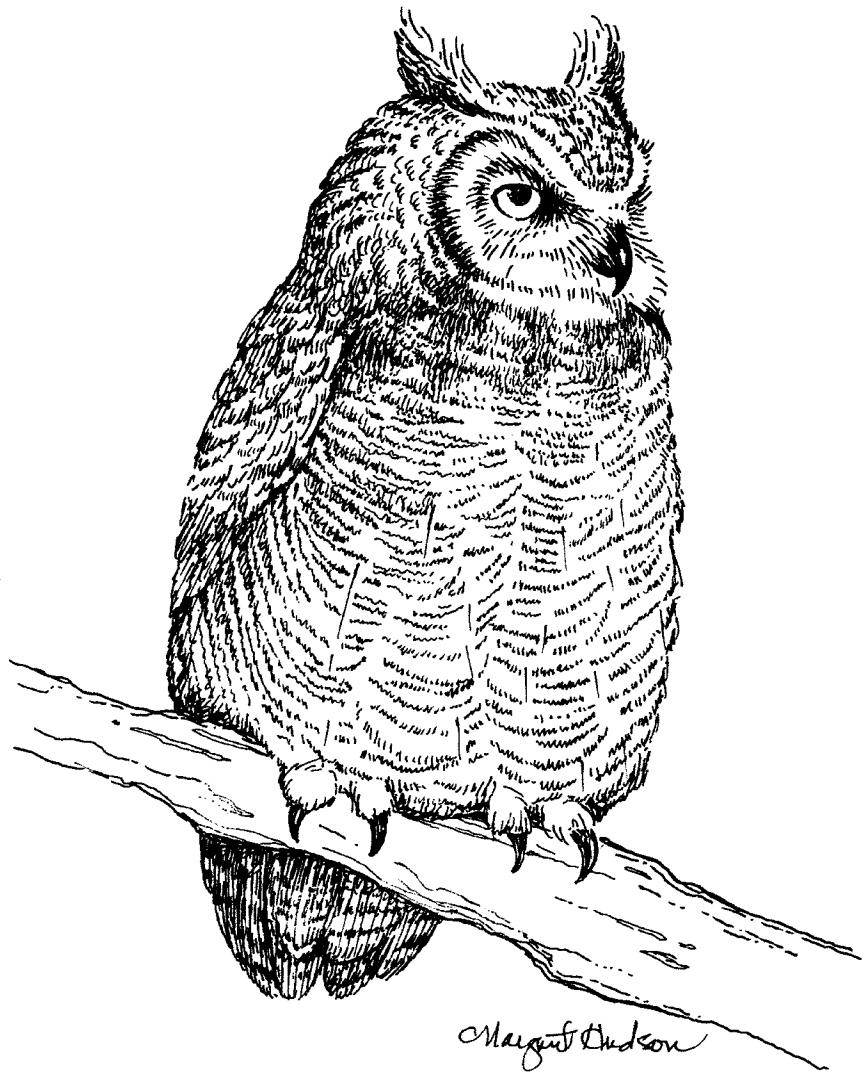
by Carol Rice

“He can turn his head all the way around.” This is a common misconception, but it is true that owls can turn their heads 270 degrees. As with other owls, the great horned owl has such large eyes that they are immobile, so it has to turn its head in order to see what’s happening around it.

If someone mentions an owl to you, the bird you will picture in your mind’s eye is likely the great horned owl. It is the prototypical owl, even to the hooting we associate with it. Possessing wonderful camouflage, great eyesight, and extraordinary hearing, the great horned is a fierce raptor with powerful talons. It has 500 pounds per square inch of crushing power as compared to an adult man who has 60 pounds per square inch in his hands. It has been referred to as the “tiger of the air.”

The “horns” on this owl’s head are neither horns nor ears but merely tufts of feathers. Its actual ears are located lower on his head and at different heights, enabling the owl to determine the location of a sound. Adding to its incredible hunting ability is its “silent flight.” This serves two purposes – the owl won’t be heard by its prey, and it won’t drown out other sounds (like the sound of prey) while he’s flying. The owl is a nocturnal hunter, and his excellent eyesight allows him to see in very low light. The size of this owl combined with its other excellent physical attributes allow it to hunt a wide variety of prey animals with rabbits being its favorite food. However, this bird even hunts skunks and porcupines and other owls as well as a variety of rodents, birds, and some large insects.

Great horned populations are widely distributed, and mated pairs are permanent residents in their territories. The birds nest early (before March), and they start brooding as soon as the first egg is laid. (Most birds wait until the full clutch is laid.) Females are larger than males with an average adult weighing a bit over three pounds with a wingspan of 49". These owls actually appear larger than they are as their feathering



Great Horned Owl. Illustration by Margaret Hudson.

is very thick and extends down their toes. If one inserts a finger into the feathers of the owl, it will sink about half-way before reaching its skin.

For several years not too long ago, a great horned owl nested in one of the very top nesting structures in the heron rookery in the middle of Baker’s Lake. One could see her sitting on the nest in the very coldest days of late winter. Later, one could even see the owlets peeping over the edge of the nest. This is truly a local resident who is a bird for all seasons!