

# Fort Matanzas

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Fort Matanzas National Monument



## Great Horned Owl

*Bubo virginianus*

To a rabbit or a mouse, it's the Silent Death from the Sky. To the early Greeks, it was the symbol of Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom. In many Native American stories, the owl is a foolish creature, although to the Senecas it was one of the first animals to receive its voice. To the Aztecs the owl was the symbol of death. They have long been associated with witches and Halloween. And now we're familiar with them as the messengers in the Harry Potter books.

In the winters of 2003 and 2004 a pair of Great Horned Owls nested in the park to the delight of visitors. For several years, although we would hear hoots in late fall, the owls did not appear to nest close by. However, starting in November 2009, three great horned owls were sighted in the vicinity of the visitor center nearly every day. Owls tend to mate for life, and usually return to the same area each year. The third owl was likely an off-spring from last year.

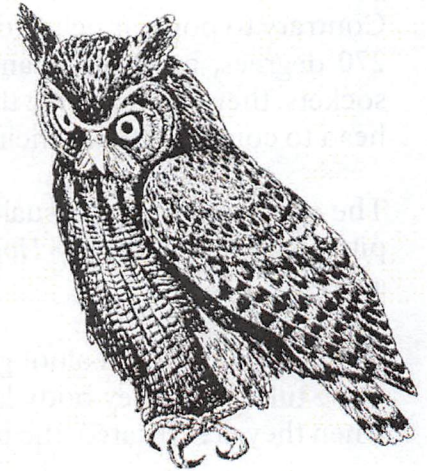
All December we could hear them, "Hoo. Hoo-oo. Hoo. Hoo," hooting back in forth among the trees at dusk. Maybe, we will be lucky again this year, and they will nest where visitors can see them. Being poor nest builders, they will often take over an abandoned hawk, crow, or squirrel nest, or even just a flat spot where two limbs branch horizontally in a Y-shape.

Great horned owls lay up to six eggs with an average of 2 to 3. These eggs are dull white, nearly round, and about 2 inches (5.5 cm) in diameter. In 2003 the female incubated the eggs while the male usually stood watch in a tree close by. In the morning or evening, their favored hunting times, he would bring her a mouse to eat.

Incubation lasts 26 to 35 days with the egg laid first hatching first, so that chick has an advantage. It takes another month before the chicks get their flight feathers. The parents will then both have to work full time to feed the hungry, fast-growing balls of fluff who will not be ready to finally leave the nest until two months after hatching.

The great horned owl is one of the largest of the American owls, weighing 3-4 pounds (1.5-1.8 kg) and standing 18-25 inches tall (46-64 cm) with a wingspan of 40-60 inches (1-1.8 meters). They are found throughout North America in forests, swamps, and even deserts, claiming a territory of about two square miles, depending on the abundance of prey.

They are powerful and efficient hunters, swooping silently down on their prey with their wings folded until the last moment, taking their prey completely by surprise in their strong talons. The soft, serrated edges of their feathers allow them to fly and glide nearly silently. They will take mice, rabbits, skunks, and even large birds like hawks, ducks, and turkeys. After eating, the owl will regurgitate the bones, fur, and feathers which were not digested. These owl pellets can be found on the ground under their favorite trees.



(Over)

Both sexes look similar with the female slightly larger. The chest is barred in shades of brown with a white collar at the neck. The "ears" or "horns" are really tufts of feathers. The actual ears are hidden under the feathers at the sides of the head. The facial disk may have orange-ish or grayish feathers with whiter feathers forming a V between the large yellow eyes. This disk acts like a parabolic antenna to funnel sound into the ear openings. Acute hearing and sharp eyesight help owls to be formidable hunters. Their soft, fringed feathers also muffle the sound of their flight.

Contrary to popular belief, owls cannot turn their heads completely around. They can rotate their heads 270 degrees, however, thanks to extra vertebra in their necks. Because their eyes are fixed in their sockets, they cannot move their eyes up and down or side to side. Instead, the owl has to move its whole head to compensate for their fixed eyes.

The call of the male is usually 4 or 5 hoots: *Hoo, hoo-oo, hoo, hoo*. Then the female answers in a lower pitch with 6 to 8 hoots: *Hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo-oo, hoo-oo*. The hooting can be heard more than a mile away.

With its ear tufts and aloof gaze, the great Horned owl is nicknamed the "cat owl". Like a cat, it can use these tufts to convey body language. When they are alert and inquisitive, the "ears" stand upright. But when they are irritated, the tufts will lie flat.

These large owls have no natural predators, but they may be killed in territorial fights with eagles or other owls, or more often, by collisions with moving automobiles. Eggs and young may be preyed upon by feral cats and raccoons.

**Remember that all plants and animals in the park are protected by state and federal laws. Please allow our owls to have the personal space they need for successful mating by observing them only from a distance. If the owls start to look at you instead of at each other, YOU ARE TOO CLOSE.**

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