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Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus*

The Great Horned Owl, Florida's largest owl, is a fierce nocturnal hunter. It is one of the most widespread New World species occupying all but the northernmost areas of North America and all of Central and South America. Writing of their "untenable ferocity...their magnificent bearing, their objection to carrion, and strictly carnivorous tastes," Seton (1890 in Bent 1938) called Great Horned Owls, "winged tigers among the most pronounced and savage of birds of prey."

Habitat. Great Horned Owls occupy open oak forests throughout most of their range, but they are most often associated with the state's open pinelands. However, Howell (1932) quoted Weston's observation that they occur in river bottoms in northwestern Florida, and Stevenson and Anderson (1994) stated that Grimes found them in the Jacksonville area "mainly along the salt and brackish streams where rabbits and rails abound." Even where development has cut into the forests, Great Horned Owls can still occur if some foraging and breeding habitat remains.



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Of its diet Bent (1938) wrote, "almost any living creature that walks, crawls, flies, or swims, except for the large mammals, is its legitimate prey." Rodents such as rats, mice, squirrels, and rabbits are frequently hunted, but mammals up to the size of skunks or domestic cats are taken on occasion (Howell 1932, Bent 1938). Birds up to the size of egrets (Callahan and Carey 1979), American Bitterns, swans, domestic turkeys, and Red-tailed Hawks, also are eaten. Toland (1991) observed Great Horned Owls eating recently hatched Atlantic Loggerhead Turtles (*Caretta caretta*) at Vero Beach in 1989 and 1990.

Although they can construct their own nests, Great Horned Owls usually nest in a heron or hawk nest. Most of the nest is abandoned, but the owls sometimes evict the "rightful owner" and take over occupancy (Bent 1938).

A typical clutch consists of 2 white eggs. Incubation, performed solely by the female, takes 26 to 35 days. The young leave the nest at 35 days of age (Ehrlich et al. 1988). Because they cannot fly until they are 9 or 10 weeks of age (Bent 1938), the young are dependent on their parents for food for weeks after leaving the nest. One brood is raised per year.

Seasonal Occurrence. This year-round resident breeds in Florida chiefly in winter. Eggs are laid from December to March (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Status. The Great Horned Owl is fairly common throughout the mainland but is absent from the Keys. Its over range has not changed since Howell (1932) published Florida Bird Life. Gaps in the Atlas map in much of the northern peninsula and Panhandle are probably due to inadequate coverage, as these areas are largely covered with pinewoods. On the other hand, gaps in South Florida are probably accurate, because much of this area lacks forested lands or consists of flooded cypress swamps more suitable for Barred Owls (Bent 1938).

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Sponsored by J. Holly Taylor

Great Horned Owl

