



# Great Horned Owl

## Coloring Instructions:

Yellow - the eyes

Black - the bill

White - the eyebrows,  
chin, and throat

Brown - the facial disc  
around the eyes, crown,  
feet, "beard," and ear  
tufts

The belly and undertail  
are white with brown  
bars.

The prey in the picture  
is a mouse.

# Great Horned Owl

**Length:** 22"

**Wingspan:** 44"

**Habitat:** Resident in all habitats

**Field marks:** Large, "eared" owl

This night hunter won't be an easy bird to see. During the day, it usually roosts next to the trunk of a tree. The brownish gray feathers help the owl look like bark, so the owl blends in with the tree trunk. Your first contact with this bird will probably be its dusk or dawn hooting, a series of about four low-pitched, loud hoots, "Who, who, who, who." Follow its call and you might see a large, dark shape up in a tree.

Owls are the best known of the **nocturnal** birds. There are other birds that are active at night, such as the Common Nighthawk and the Common Poorwill, but these night flying insect eaters are not here in the winter when there are few insects.

A Great Horned Owl knows its territory well. It knows how high above the ground its favorite hunting perches are. The owl can move easily around at night. Owls tend to hunt by sitting quietly on a perch, listening and looking. Owls have large eyes for seeing better at night.

They also have outstanding hearing. The "horns" of the owl are not ears. They are just feathers that help provide camouflage. But owls do have special feathers that help gather and channel the sounds of mice and rabbits rustling in the dark. The prominent circle of feathers around each eye acts like a satellite dish. The discs of feathers help gather the sounds to the ear. The owl moves its head until the sound coming in both ears sounds the same. When the head is in this position, the owl is looking straight at whatever is making the sound.

The night may be so dark that the owl cannot yet see what is making the sound, but it can start its silent glide toward the sound, eyes looking in the right place to see the animal when the owl gets close enough. The **nictating membrane**, a transparent third eyelid, closes over the eyes to protect them in case the owl is flying into unseen brush and branches.

The owl stretches its talons out towards the victim. Four long toes on each foot spread wide. As the owl's legs bend to absorb the shock, the talons reflexively grasp the prey. If that initial shock does not kill the victim, the owl can bite the neck at the base of the skull. Great Horned Owls hunt so efficiently that they can reduce the rodent population within their territory to a point where the owls must move to a new territory.

# Great Horned Owl Challenges

Put a check mark in the box when you have completed the challenge.

- Hear a *Great Horned Owl*. The commonly heard call of the *Western Screech Owl*, a series of whistled notes, is very different from the low hoots of the *Great Horned Owl*.
- See a *Great Horned Owl*. They are large birds.
- Find an owl pellet beneath a favorite perch.
- Follow up on a raucous mobbing of crows and jays around a tree and see them harassing an owl that they have found.

Find more educational materials at [www.wintuaudbon.org/education](http://www.wintuaudbon.org/education)

