

Get Wild: Great horned owls – our neighbors in the wilderness and forests

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Karn Stiegelmeier
Get Wild


I have enjoyed seeing and hearing the amazing great horned owl many times but never like last week, when I watched one for over an hour while sitting in the back of Alpine Gardens with my friend, Sherie. She and her neighbors had seen the owl family nesting nearby. They were able to witness the owls flying, hooting and fledgling owlets trying some early flights, but what we saw that night was amazing: an owl, perched just feet from us, staring with those yellow owl eyes into ours.

The great horned, like most owls, hunts mainly at night. We saw her slowly getting ready, stretching her wings and looking around before she took off after sunset to pursue prey. Owls will swoop down with their specially adapted soft feathers, which absorb sounds so prey won't hear them approaching, and their extra-sharp talons to capture the prey. Owls have good vision in low-light conditions and excellent hearing. In the winter, they may store uneaten prey, coming back later to thaw out a frozen carcass by "incubating" it.

Typically, they have two to three eggs with incubation mostly done by the female for 28 to 35 days. Both parents provide food for the young owls. At 5 weeks, the young will climb on nearby branches, and fly at nine to 10 weeks, while still fed by the parents for several months.

Great horned owls are the most common owl in North America, ranging from Mexico to Canada and Alaska. They nest in forested areas and begin their mating season here in March. They vary in color throughout North America, from darker grays to almost white. Birds from the Pacific Northwest tend to be dark and sooty. Across the Southwest, they are paler and grayer, and birds from subarctic Canada can be almost white. Our local owls have a combination of gray and white stripes.

Great horned owls are very successful hunters, perhaps because they are not picky about their prey. They tend to eat larger mammals than smaller owls in order to sustain their bigger bodies, including rabbits, geese, squirrels, rats and other bird species such as raptors. They will also eat skunks. Like most birds, their sense of smell is very weak. Colorado Parks and Wildlife lists 14 species of owls that can be seen in Colorado, but our great horned is the most common and the largest, at 17- to 25-inches tall with a wingspan of 3 to 5 feet. Many owl species are losing population due to loss of their more-specific habitat requirements in Colorado.

Easier than viewing the great horned owls, you can hear their hoots. You may hear a deep stuttering series of four or five hoots, especially in spring months. Both sexes hoot, but males are lower pitched than females. The males' territorial hoots can be heard a few miles away at night. 

Colorado's protected lands, especially wilderness areas, provide excellent habitat without much disruption by people and their pets. The great horned owl, like many species, will also take advantage of locations near human habitation. In Summit County, developed areas near rivers and wetlands are ideal habitat for

many native species. Many summer nesting birds in Summit County have already migrated south, but these owls can be seen and heard year-round. Looking at them, you can imagine those feathers could keep them warm all winter long.



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“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Karn Stiegelmeier is a board member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.



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