

Tiger of the Treetops

Article by Diane Hall
Rio Grande Valley Chapter



Great Horned Owl pair – photo by Anita Westervelt

The Tiger of the Treetops glides silently through the dark forest, its bright yellow eyes searching for a meal. Perhaps a mouse, bird, rabbit or even a skunk will fall prey to this feathered predator during the many hours of darkness.

This nocturnal “tiger” is not beset with orange and black stripes, whiskers and a long tail, rather its densely barred and mottled brown body sports a white throat bib, large ear tufts and a wingspan of nearly five feet. This Tiger of the Treetops, more commonly known as the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), is found throughout North America in a variety of habitats from forests and deserts to city parks. It is the largest common owl in Texas.

Have you ever encountered a Great Horned Owl or seen or heard its sign? During the daytime, listen for mobbing crows or small birds which will scold roosting owls to drive them away. At night, listen for their deep resonant monotone *hoo*, *hoo-hoo-hoo*, *hoo hoo*. Often Great Horned Owls are seen at dusk or dawn perched on a tree, pole or wire. Another clue for spotting an owl or at least its roosting location is to find an owl pellet on the ground.

Obviously owls don’t get out a knife and fork to create bite-size pieces at meal time nor do they have teeth for chewing. Instead, owls eat their prey whole and later regurgitate the indigestible material in a compact pellet several inches long. Dissecting owl pellets to examine the bones, feathers and fur allows scientists and students alike to identify the diet of the owls. I have enjoyed the awe of discovery by students with this activity over the years. It’s also fun to find owl pellets when taking a walk in the woods or if you’re lucky, in your own yard.



Owl pellet – photo by Anita Westervelt

There are several adaptations which make owls such effective feathered mousetraps. Large eyes take in the ambient light and allow owls to see at least 35 times better than humans, in some cases 100 times better. According to the TPWD website, “Studies have shown that the Long-eared, Tawny, and Barn Owls can see their prey from six feet away with as little as .00000073 foot candles of illumination.” In comparison, the illumination of a moonless, cloudy night rarely drops below .004 foot candles. Wow, that’s pretty impressive!

Since the owl's eyes are located on the front of its head, rather than the sides of the head like prey animals, binocular and three dimensional vision is possible. And in case you are wondering, no, owls can't turn their heads all the way around like you see in cartoons. They do have very flexible necks however, which allow them to rotate 270 degrees.

The owl's excellent eyesight is complimented by its exceptional hearing. The National Wildlife Federation notes that the owl "can detect a mouse stepping on a twig from a distance of 75 feet." The tufts on the head of the Great Horned Owl are often mistaken for ears. These tufts are for camouflage and perhaps body language communication. Actually the owl's ears are simply slits on each side of the head at the edge of the facial disk. One ear is positioned slightly higher than the other allowing the owl to triangulate and locate the source of the sound easier.

Once the prey is detected by sight and/or sound, the adaptation of silent flight allows the owl to take their prey by surprise and grasp them with razor sharp talons. Comb-like serrations on the leading edge of the owl's wings break up the air flow over the wings and allow silent flight.

Although Great Horned Owls have excellent eyesight and hearing, they have a very poor sense of smell. What a fortunate lack of ability as a predator of skunks! Everyone else might notice the smell, but the owl doesn't.



Great Horned owl on silent wings
—photo by Anita Westervelt

My favorite experiences with owls involves owl calling. It all started in high school Science Club when our advisors took club members on a camp out with an evening Owl Prowl. We sat still and silent with eyes and ears searching while recorded calls of owls were broadcast in the night air. Over and over we tried and tried to call in an owl on several occasions, but there was *never* a response from a wild owl. Nevertheless, I was intrigued with the owl calling concept and tucked it away in my memories.

Years later with myself as the naturalist, I repeated the owl calling activity with my own students. I prefaced the activity with my Science Club experience just so the students or adults would know we may or may not hear or see an owl. *Hooo, hoo-hoo-hoo, hooo....*"Did you hear that? That's the real Great Horned Owl!!!" I gasped. What a thrilling experience for my students and me as we connected with nature! In years hence, I've had Screech Owls fly over the group, Barred and Great Horned Owls land in nearby trees to investigate, owls reply to our calls from a distance and yes, silence.

Whether or not you're blessed to see or hear an owl or find an owl pellet, I encourage you to take an evening or early morning walk to connect with nature. Whoooo knows what you may discover?