

above the ground, often in pines, but they can also be in hollow logs, stumps, or tree cavities. I have seen them nesting on power line stations. The birds are probably monogamous. Courtship displays by the male include bowing and dancing with half-open wings, as well as calling and bill snapping and clicking. They engage in mutual caressing with their bills. The male usually brings food to the female. The owlets do not open their eyes until a week old, and soon are clothed in fluffy white or tan down, an age at which these savage birds are very cute and endearing.

Great Horned Owls attack virtually anything that walks, crawls, flies, or swims and is not too large for them to kill. They hunt primarily in the evening and before dawn, where they usually fall with nearly closed wings or glide silently down upon their prey. Rough-edged first primary wing feathers reduce vortex noise. This characteristic combined with deeply fluted primaries help produce their silent flight. They have spectacular vision and asymmetrical ear cavities that aid them in locating prey. They prefer rabbits and rodents but kill larger mammals, including domestic cats, opossums, porcupines, and skunks. I remember well my mother complaining that the stuffed Great Horned Owl that my father had in his study smelled of skunk. My in-laws from Nebraska swear that their small dog fell prey to the Great Horned Owls that lived in their bottomland cottonwoods. These aggressive owls kill and eat Red-tailed and Red-shouldered hawks, turkeys, and bitterns, and have been recorded killing Barred and Barn owls. They catch fish and amphibians by wading into water, and invertebrate prey includes scorpions. They are known to cache food and thaw frozen food in winter by "incubating" it.

Great Horned Owls have few if any predators except for man. They have been widely hunted and are frequent victims of power lines and automobiles. Despite habitat alteration it remains a common owl with surprising population densities. The 1986 Newburyport Christmas Count reported, for example, sixty-two Great Horned Owls. This sole American representative of the world's eagle owls is one of our most interesting, ferocious, and exciting birds. W. E. Davis, Jr.

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

Gordon Morrison's last cover portrait for *Bird Observer* appeared on the June 1991 issue. With two other artists, he has just completed a mural entitled, "North Attleboro Through the Years," now in place in the North Attleboro town hall. Gordon is also illustrating *A Field Guide to Ecology of Western Forests*, authored by John Kricher and due to be released in the spring of 1993. Gordon is writing and illustrating a series, "Birds in the Garden," appearing in *Horticulture Magazine*, and featuring such species as the Purple Martin, Northern Cardinal, and Eastern Bluebird. Gordon can be reached at 52 Bulfinch Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760.

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