



MONTEREY NEWS



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The Great Horned Owl

Great horned owls are one of the largest masters of the skies along the south shore of Buzzards Bay, relying on both sight and sound for hunting prey. They are similar in size to snowy owls, with a wingspan of up to six feet and weighing in the range of five pounds. Great horned owls are known to prey on bald eagle nests, and in a fight, with ferocity equal to the bald eagle, either bird might be victorious.

They are sometimes called “tiger owls,” with their tufted ears and bright yellow-eyed ferocious stare. They may take on porcupines, snakes, and coyotes with fatal results for both prey and predator. If you have recently heard distant hooting on deep mid-winter freezing nights, this might indicate nest building activity. They are the first birds to start nesting, possibly as early as January, as in my illustration. They typically hatch two or three chicks.

Both parents take part in selecting a nesting site, frequently ones left vacant by other birds, twenty to sixty feet off the ground. They sometimes nest on a cliff ledge or broken-off tree stump by adding a few sticks and branches as a roosting platform, or in larger hollows in trees. Exposed nests are sometimes blown apart during the winter, so the young chick’s ability to hang on is an important evolutionary adaptation. After a month-long incubation, the chicks stay in the nest for six weeks before entering a “branching phase” where they will cling tightly to nearby branches. Both parents provide small mammals such as mice, rats, rabbits, ground squirrels, lizards, frogs, and some birds. While they are ready to fly on their own at two months and begin hunting, they stay with their parents for most of the summer to gain advanced hunting skills.



Watching young owls being encouraged to fend for themselves is so entertaining that some avid birdwatchers may consider putting up a nest box to attract a breeding pair of adults. Be sure to attach a guard across the entry to prevent predators from raiding eggs and vulnerable new hatchlings. The presence of even other species of owls on your property such as the tiny saw-whet owl can endanger a nest. These owls in bright moonlight add a quintessentially ghostly storybook spirit, as in the Harry Potter series.

While great horned and other owls can be difficult to observe directly, doing so will fascinate you and others with the environmental awareness brought on the silently-feathered wings of these secretive nocturnal avians. — George B. Emmons