



Effie Yeaw Nature Center

Bird Residents of the Nature Center

Virginia the Great Horned Owl

Personal History:

Virginia was picked up on I-5 at Williams after being struck by a vehicle. This was in the summer of 1984. Dr. Speck of Williams Veterinary Clinic treated her and determined that damage to the extensor ligaments of her left wing was permanent. He transferred her to Jim Covell of the Norman Marsh Nature Center in August of 1984. Virginia was their star attraction until June, 1987 when that center was closed. They passed her on to us at the Effie Yeaw Nature Center.



Virginia has settled down since we adapted the large aviary to her needs. She is quite happy except when there is too much noise and too many people pass through at one time. Virginia dislocated her injured wing over the weekend of July 4, 1996. After her veterinarian examined her, he recommended that Virginia's wing be amputated. Since the amputation she has recuperated slowly but surely and seems to be doing well.

Natural History: Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)

Description: The great horned owl is a large, mottled brown owl with ear tufts or "horns." Their back is spotted with a darker brown and the underparts are cross-banded with dark. There is a white feather bib at the throat which shows when the owl calls or is disturbed. The large eyes have a bright yellow iris. Males and females look alike but the females are larger. In size this owl is up to two feet long and has a wingspread between three and five feet. The great horned owl is the largest owl with ear tufts.

Habitat: The great horned owl is widespread over the United States and Canada. It is found anywhere there are trees for nesting, from city parks and suburbs to wilderness areas. A fierce and powerful bird, it hunts everywhere: woodlands, open fields, deserts, seashores and marshes.

Food: Called a winged tiger, the great horned owl preys on small and medium sized animals: insects, fish, frogs, eels, songbirds, rodents, snakes, bats, rabbits, skunks, young foxes, weasels, opossums, herons, water birds and fowl up to turkey size and even grown cats in the city. They are able to prey on skunks as they are oblivious to their strong-smelling defense.

Communication: The most commonly recognized call of the great horned owl is a soft, deep and resonant six-syllable hoot. Fledglings chasing their parents and begging for food sound like children screaming. When disturbed, owls clack their beaks and fluff their feathers. Pairs of owls preen each other and so strengthen their bond.

Nesting & Care of Young: Great horned owls mate for life, maturing and breeding at about the age of two years. They nest in early January or February in a nest they have taken over from a big hawk, eagle, heron, crow or even the leafy nest of a squirrel. The nests are anywhere from 15 to 75 feet up in a tree with substantial cover. Sometimes they will use a cave or large hole in a cliff. Two to five eggs are laid several days apart and are incubated for 26-30 days. The young are fledged at 63-70 days but often leave the nest sooner, being protected and fed on the ground by their parents until they can fly and hunt for themselves, at about four months. The great horned owl has only one brood a year, usually fledging only one or two owlets.

Additional Information: Great horned owls have excellent hearing and eyesight. With feathers especially adapted for silent flight, they are fearsome nocturnal predators. They also hunt during daylight hours if food is needed for the young in their nest. The record long life of a wild banded bird was 13-14 years before it was shot. One captive bird reportedly lived 29 years. Another laid eggs for more than 19 years. The flight speed of the great horned owl is 40 m.p.h. They have nested in magpie nests in our nature area a number of times recently.