

8/8/81



# Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan.

## THE GREAT HORNED OWL



Great Horned Owl

Often referred to as the "tiger that flies," the Great Horned Owl is one of the largest owls in the world. Its body is often over two feet long and may have a wing span of more than five feet. As in most birds, the female is larger than the male. A large female will weigh up to five pounds, while the males rarely reach four pounds.

If you ever see this bird, especially in the wild, you will never forget it. As its name indicated, it has conspicuous feathered ear tufts that look like horns. Its feathers are tawny to buff-colored and its underside is barred with white. Second to this owl's "horns" are its large prominent yellow eyes that are almost the size of human eyes. Although the great horned owl is rarely seen, its size and distinct characteristics make it easy to identify.

The great horned owl is a predator at the top of the food chain. It will eat any animal it can catch. It prefers rabbits, rats and mice but will also feed on domestic poultry, fish, skunks, insects and a wide variety of other animals. Often killed by man for its supposed damage to wildlife, the owl actually helps keep wildlife populations healthy and in balance. During years of peak skunk populations it will feed largely on skunks. If the great horned owl has been destroyed by man, the skunks go unchecked and vandalize bird's nests and in turn the bird populations will suffer. It is also a key predator of rats. A researcher found over 100 recently killed rat carcasses near an owl nest with only the preferred parts eaten. During years of peak rodent populations, this bird does great service to man by eliminating thousands of rodents.

Since man is probably the most efficient predator of all, other predators are often labeled as bad. The deep rooted reason for this attitude is that these other predators compete with man. In reality predators like the great horned owl help keep wildlife populations healthy. They take the easiest prey first which is usually the very young or old or the sick.

The great horned owl is a well-equipped hunter that seeks its quarry in the darkness or on very dim overcast days. Its night vision is excellent. The owl's keen sense of hearing is its second most developed sense. The ends of the owl's primary flight feathers are frayed which make it an almost silent flyer, an important characteristic for hunting. It has large sharp talons or claws used to grasp its prey and a large hooked beak for tearing meat.

The great horned owl occurs in heavily forested areas all over North America. Pairs have a hunting territory of about 3,500 acres. Pairs mate for life and nest in heavy timber, caves or gorges but most often remodel the nests of other large birds such as hawks or crows. During the mating season, which is mid-winter, the male's stately image changes to comedian. He performs aerial acrobatics and stunts to attract a mate.

Two to five large white eggs are laid in February or March and hatch in 3 to 5 days. The young remain in the nest for up to five months while the parents are kept busy feeding and defending them. Great horned owls are excellent parents and will vigorously defend their young from any intruder. The early nesting strategy gives the young owls a unique advantage over many other birds. They are out of the nest and hunting while other predatory birds are still nesting. They also have more time to learn hunting skills and can fend for themselves by their first winter.

Nature has provided many unique adaptations which enable the cycle of life to continue. The great horned owl is just one example.



YOUR FAMILY JEAN CENTER  
Levis • Oshkosh B-Gosh  
Sedgefield & Wrangler

PHONE 634-2170

WALKER HOTEL BLDG.  
ON MAIN ST. • HAYWARD