

**California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System**  
**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**California Interagency Wildlife Task Group**

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GREAT HORNED OWL

*Bubo virginianus*

Family: STRIGIDAE

Order: STRIGIFORMES

Class: AVES

B265

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common, permanent resident throughout the state from sea level to 2100 m (0-7000 ft), occasionally to 3200 m (10,500 ft). Exploits a variety of forests with meadows and other openings, extending from valley foothill hardwood to mixed conifer habitats. Commonly feeds and breeds in riparian, conifer, chaparral, and desert habitats.

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Usually makes low, rapid flight from perch to capture prey on ground. Rabbits, rodents, and other small to medium-sized mammals usually make up 90% of the diet. Also eats birds (occasionally smaller or young raptors; Wiley 1975b), amphibians, reptiles, fish, and arthropods. Frequently forages in meadows and woodland or forest openings, or along edges.

**Cover:** Requires trees with dense foliage for roosting; often uses thickly wooded canyons.

**Reproduction:** Nests in abandoned hawk, crow, raven, or squirrel nest, in cave or crevice, on cliff ledge, occasionally in snag or tree cavity (Call 1978). Nests in trees usually 12-21 m (40-70 ft) above ground.

**Water:** Most water requirements probably met from prey (Bartholomew and Cade 1963). Will drink water in captivity.

**Pattern:** Frequents forested habitats; feeds especially in edges, openings, and meadows.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, nocturnal and crepuscular activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Mostly not migratory, but will move upslope and downslope in response to weather conditions.

**Home Range:** In Wyoming, home range varied from 1.2 to 2.9 km<sup>2</sup> (0.4 to 1.1 mi<sup>2</sup>), with an average of 2.1 km<sup>2</sup> (0.8 mi<sup>2</sup>). In eastern Oregon, home range averaged 12.1 km<sup>2</sup> (4.7 mi<sup>2</sup>). In Michigan farmland, nesting density varied from 0.04 to 0.08 pair per km<sup>2</sup> (0.1 to 0.2 per mi<sup>2</sup>), and wintering density varied from 0.12 to 0.15 individuals per km<sup>2</sup> (0.3 to 0.4 per mi<sup>2</sup>) (Craighead and Craighead 1956).

**Territory:** Average territory was 65 ha (160 ac) in oak habitats in Kansas (Fitch 1958). Male defends territory throughout breeding season more aggressively than female.

**Reproduction:** Breeds from mid-January through June, peak usually March through May.

Clutch size 1-6; average 3; often laid in February or March. Incubation 26-35 days, semialtricial young fledge in 35-56 days. Male may assist with nest activities. Craighead and Craighead (1956) reported fledging success (young fledged/eggs laid) of 27% and 50% in Michigan, and 89% in Wyoming.

Niche: Golden eagles and humans may be the only predators (Hoechlin 1976). Competitors for food include Cooper's hawks, American kestrels, and other large owls. Population numbers respond to prey abundance.

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