

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

GREAT HORNED OWL

Bubo virginianus

Family: STRIGIDAE
B265

Order: STRIGIFORMES

Class: AVES

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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 km² (0.4 to 1.1 mi²), with an average of 2.1 km² (0.8 mi²). In eastern Oregon, home range averaged 12.1 km² (4.7 mi²). In Michigan farmland, nesting density varied from 0.04 to 0.08 pair per km² (0.1 to 0.2 per mi²), and wintering density varied from 0.12 to 0.15 individuals per km² (0.3 to 0.4 per mi²) (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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