

## TODAY I HELD A GREAT HORNED OWL

Today I held a great horned owl in my arms, like a baby.

My terrier found it at the foot of the white oak, and his interest in the tall grasses drew me to investigate.

At first it seemed to be a branch. Then I saw the owl lying face down. I touched its shoulder and gently rolled it over. I was looking into the golden, half-lidded eyes of a dead great horned owl, *Bubo virginianus*.

The ear tufts set wide across its broad head, and the bulky shape and white throat bib set this owl species apart from the others. The great horned owl is found all across North America, living in a wide range of environments, from deep woods and desert cliffs to suburbs and parks.

I lifted the bird into my arms and cradled it for a closer look. It wasn't heavy, weighing maybe three pounds, and measuring about 19 inches along my arm. Great horned owls generally weigh between two and five and a half pounds and run anywhere from 19 to 25 inches long. Its breast-bone wasn't sharp against my prodding fingers and I figured it hadn't starved to death. There were no signs of trauma, no blood, no feathers lying about, and a yank of grass was clutched in its foot, perhaps a sign that the bird died on the ground.

It was just beginning to stiffen, so it hadn't been dead long. Their only natural enemies are other great horned owls and sometimes the northern goshawk, when nesting disputes erupt. Great horned owls aren't nest builders in the usual sense. They take over old nests from other large birds, or nest in tree holes and cliff ledges. They'll even seize active

nests of red tailed hawks, and have been known to raise their young in a corner of an active bald eagle nest.

But while they're opportunistic with housing, great horned owls are good parents. The owlets are ready to fly in about 10 to 14 days but both parents continue to look after their youngsters for upwards of three months. This and the fact that nesting begins in January and February gives the young owls a good start on life.

Holding the bird close I detect the faint perfume of skunk on this owl, one of the larger creatures these birds prey upon. They also take rabbits and raccoons, woodchucks, hawks, an assortment of rodents, and birds as large as geese. Not strictly nocturnal hunters, they will hunt at dawn and dusk, watching from a tree or cliff-side perch before silently swooping down upon their prey.

I smooth the owl's feathers and am fascinated, as I always am with feathers, at how each little barble catches the next and the feather falls back together, and then falls into place, each feather creating a tight weave next to the other, for warmth. Owl feathers are even more unusual because of their frayed edges that gives their 46 to 60 inch wing-span silent flight.

My terrier whined for us to continue our walk, but once more I looked into the eyes of the great bird. I smoothed its chest feathers, and set it in the crotch of the oak. I wanted to keep it from the ants a while longer. And then, as I supposed my Cherokee ancestors of the Bird Clan might have done, I said a prayer to see it on its journey.