

Great Horned Owl

Bubo virginianus

The Great Horned Owl is the second most abundant owl in Vermont, and was recorded in 32% of the priority blocks. This American species of *Bubo* occurs from the tree limit in the Arctic to the tip of South America, and is highly successful in climates and habitats ranging from deserts to forests to city parks. The Great Horned Owl, a distinctive large brown owl with yellow eyes, prominent feather tufts, and a white breast bib, is the most powerful and one of the largest North American owls. As adults, these owls are largely nonmigratory. Most Great Horneds remain year-round near their hatching and breeding grounds (Stewart 1969), with pairs found near the nest site in all months, except perhaps in late summer and early fall (Baumgartner 1938). Preferred habitat is dense woodlands (often pines) for roosting, surrounded by open land (often farmland) for hunting. These conditions are ideally met in the Champlain Lowlands, where 40% of Vermont's priority block sightings were reported.

The size of one pair's territory ranges from 5.2 sq km (2 sq mi) in Kansas to 7.8–10.4 sq km (3–4 sq mi) in New York State (Baumgartner 1939). Bent (1938) believed that Great Horned Owls periodically exhausted the prey supply and were forced to change territories every four years or so, but a pair in Woodstock, Vermont, appears to have utilized the same territory of 15.5 sq km (6 sq mi) for 10 years (S. B. Laughlin, pers. observ.).

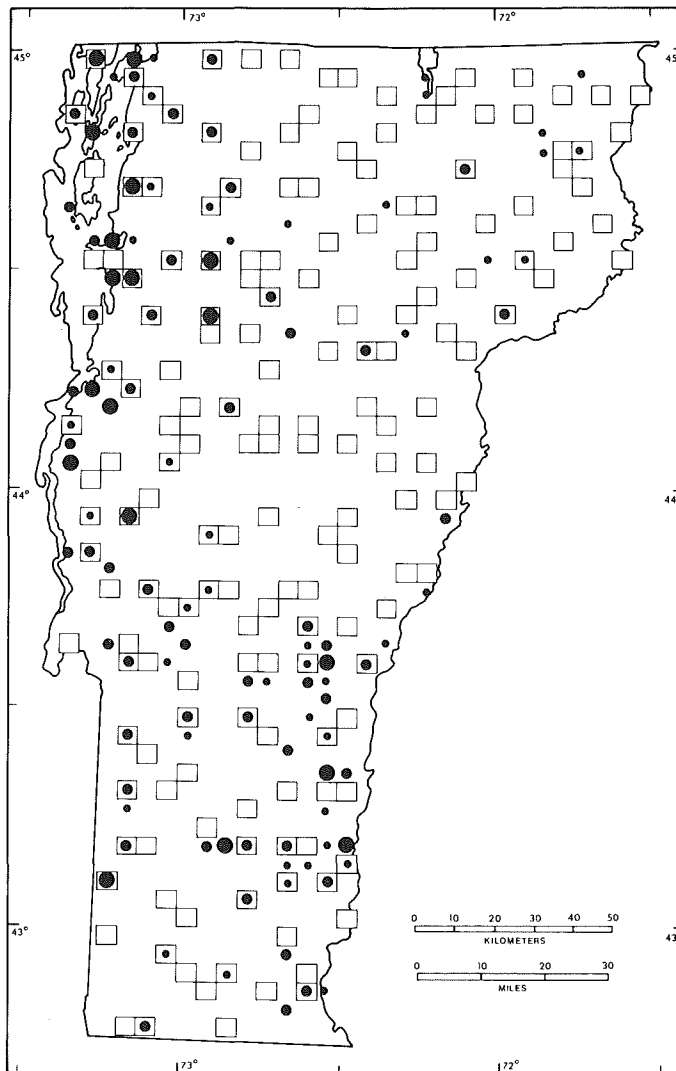
The Great Horned Owl's status in Vermont has remained much the same historically, except for a decline in the 1930s (Cutting 1884; Perkins and Howe 1901; Fortner et al. 1933; Smith 1934b). During the Atlas Project, the Great Horned was recorded in all seven physiographic regions of the state.

Great Horned Owls are one of the earliest northeastern species to nest, and are often brooding eggs as early as January or early February. Bent (1938) stated that March 1



was the usual date in Massachusetts. For nesting sites Great Horneds utilize old hawk, eagle, or osprey nests; squirrel nests; and tree hollows, cliffs, and caves (Bent 1938). During the Atlas Project, this species was recorded breeding in a Red-tailed Hawk nest in Woodstock (appropriated before the hawks returned), which was situated in a lone American linden tree in a pasture, at a height of about 9 m (30 ft); in a broken, hollow stub near Rutland; in a nest in a vacant Great Blue Heron rookery in Fairfax; and in the bare metal supports of a railroad bridge over the Connecticut River. Vermont egg dates are for 2 egg clutches, and range from March 13 to April 16. Six records of nest with young are all for 2 young, and range from April 30 through early June.

The eggs are incubated for between 28 and 35 days (Bent 1938; Kendeigh 1952), with the male feeding the female on the nest (Baumgartner 1938). The young remain in the nest for 6 to 7 weeks, cannot fly until they are 10 to 12 weeks old, and frequently tumble to the ground before fledging. The parents are very attentive and protective, and will feed the young on the ground. The fledged young will follow their parents and expect to be fed as late as the fall. Fledglings cared for at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science did not learn to hunt on their own until mid September. Vermont dates for recently fledged young (nine records) range from



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL	57 (32%)
Possible breeding:	18 (32% of total)
Probable breeding:	32 (56% of total)
Confirmed breeding:	7 (12% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	23	74	40.0
Green Mountains	13	24	23.0
North Central	2	11	3.5
Northeast Highlands	2	13	3.5
East Central	1	5	2.0
Taconic Mountains	7	44	12.0
Eastern Foothills	9	38	16.0

May 18 through July 15; two reports are of 3 fledglings.

The diet consists largely of mammals, with a decided preference shown for hares and cottontails, squirrels, rats, mice, and skunks; if a chicken- or duck-yard adjoins the owls' territory, they will take an occasional domestic bird (Errington 1932). Great Horneds tend to hunt from elevated perches (Petersen 1979). The male and female both hoot, with her hoot being higher pitched and consisting of 7 or 8 syllables; the deep, soft voice can carry for a mile or more.

The Great Horned Owl is a magnificent creature, with no natural enemies except man. Mated individuals behave very tend-

erly with each other; courtship involves much mutual preening, sitting close together, and bill stroking. Adults are very solicitous of the young, and will readily adopt and feed orphaned young (S. B. Laughlin, pers. observ.). The "winged tiger of the woodland" has a gentle side to its nature; it also provides an important check on rodents.

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