Great Horned Owls:

Natural History & Its Role in Rehabilitation

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Physical Characteristics Of Great Horned Owls

- **Sight**
  - Of all N.A. owls, they have the best visual capacity over a 24 hr photoperiod.
  - Large corneal surfaces and very large lenses.
  - Blindness is often indicated by one or both ear tufts flattened during an excited state.
- **Hearing**
  - Much more responsive to higher frequencies and choose prey accordingly.
- **Smell**
  - Based on their dietary preference of *striped* skunks, they are assumed to have a decreased sense of smell.

Gender Considerations

- Can only be determined by body size and vocalizations.
- Male calls are lower, longer lasting and more drawn out.
- Female is usually considerably larger.

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Hunting and Feeding Behaviors

- Like other predators, they consistently balance food preferences with the abundance of major prey items.
- **Sedentary and opportunistic!!!**
- This species tends to prey on that which is easy vs. favored items.
- Have been observed storing food in freezing temperatures and then thawing their cache by brooding.
- Rabbits and skunks are generally preferred, but birds, herps, fish and a variety of invertebrates are also commonly eaten.

Hunting Strategies

- Perch and Attack
- Ranging
- Approaching on foot

Published Data on GHOs

- Oddly, many natural behaviors are still under study
- Details are varied and surprisingly incomplete
- There are likely also vast differences among both individuals and populations

Nesting

- Nest sites are selected very early in the season, which allows more time for extended parental care.

- They spend little time or effort locating and preparing their nests.

- They take over established nests.

Incubation

- Single brood, will rarely lay a second clutch when the first fails
- Usually 2-3 eggs, each laid 2 days apart
- Asynchronous hatching

Incubation

Synchronous hatching

Incubation starts when **last** egg is laid

Asynchronous hatching

Incubation starts when **first** egg is laid

Incubation

- Both parents participate in nest care
- Incubation is done mainly by the female
- Male will often relieve her for short periods during the day
- Male spends most of his time supplying food and aggressively defending the nest
- Parents are both very loyal and will put themselves in harms way protecting the young

Family Life

- Hatchlings are altricial and fully dependent on parents
- Overzealous male is bringing an enormous supply of food
- Pre-fledglings are fed by the mother, who is given food by the male
- Father is generally known (allowed) to feed only the fledglings and juveniles

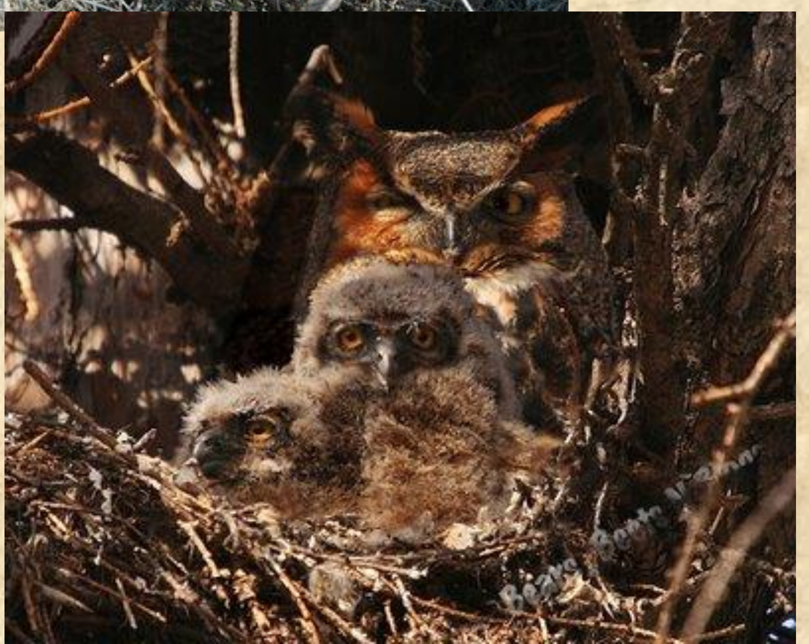
First Two Weeks

- Eyes begin to open on day 7, iris is dull yellow
- As iris becomes brighter, overall coordination and mobility increase
- Only eating small, boneless pieces of meat
- Those that fall from nest with dull colored iris, likely fell or were ‘pushed’ since they are not yet mobile enough to step off edge

3 Weeks

- At this age, brooding is discontinued over a 2-day period, regardless of climate or temperature
- Owlets begin quarreling and are very active in nest
- Nest tree is not known to be quiet

Week 4-5



- Continuing to gain mobility
- Fully erect on legs
- Facial disc darkening
- Mother still hangs out in nest
- Father increasingly impatient to feed HIS babies

Week 6

- Owlets begin branching
- Parents stay close and very defensive
- Unlike other birds, they hardly practice flapping and rarely use wings
- Primary flight feathers visible
- Father is now allowed to get closer

Great Horned Owls 'Fledge Before They Can Fly'

At 6-8 weeks, these birds are more mobie and move further around the nest tree…

- Their wing and leg muscles are poorly developed
- At this age, they often end up on the ground
- They are active and curious, spending much time walking, investigating and pouncing on things

Rehab Considerations

- Owlets less than 6 weeks old usually try to climb back up tree
- When possible, these chicks should be moved back into the tree
- Those without visible ear tufts would be candidates for intervention

Rehab Considerations

- Older chicks (with easily visible tufts) should be left alone if the site is reasonably safe

- Parents will feed and defend as they should

- In risky locations, surrounding area can be fenced temporarily and domestics pets controlled

Remember… **These birds are commonly on the ground at this point, and can usually fend for themselves in natural circumstances!**

Week 9-11

- GHOs are flighted around week 9
- They spend a few weeks lazily practicing flight
- Flight skills are more proficient in week 11
- Their adult plumage is now prevalent

Week 12

- Regardless of region, feeding tapers sharply at this age
- Young actively beg and follow parents
- Parents totally discontinue feeding over a two week period

Hunting Skills

- Like many other raptor species, parents DO NOT teach the young to hunt
- They only provide support for fumbled meals
- Studies have shown that only 10-24% of observed attacks resulted in prey capture in owlets under 15 weeks of age (Errington)
- Wild raised juveniles generally stop begging around week 20 and should be successful hunters
  - They are now in full plumage, but talons are less than adult length
- Captive reared birds are often not *fully* successful hunters for their first year (McKeever 1998)

Dispersal

- In late autumn, young will leave either voluntarily or will be aggressively driven away.
- Most studies suggest that juveniles will establish their territory within 30 miles of their natal site.
- Great Horned Owls require an extremely long period of parental support.

Rehabilitation Considerations

- Carefully assess the need for intervention with this species
- GHOWs parental support period is imperative.
- Re-nest! Re-unite!
- **Do Not Kidnap Owlets** unless there is no other option!
- Plan ahead
  - Stock a few wicker baskets
  - Reach out / befriend a tree climber
  - Be ready
  - Remember, it takes less time to re-nest than to rear in captivity
  - Post-release life expectancy should be the primary focus

Every other attempt was successful!

Rehabilitation Considerations

- Carefully assess the need for intervention with this species
- If re-uniting is not an option
  - Network with rehabilitators that have foster parents so you can transfer asap
  - Young Great Horned Owls should never be hard released
  - It is EXPECTED that juveniles will regularly return for supplemental food through their first winter
  - Choose your release sites accordingly

Nature would not involve the parents so long unless it was absolutely necessary for survival!

(-Kay McKeever)


The End