

GENUS VI.—BUBO, *Cuvier*. HORNED-OWL.

Bill short, stout, broader than high at the base, compressed toward the end; upper mandible with its dorsal line curved from the base, the edges with a slight festoon, the tip trigonal, very acute; lower mandible with the dorsal line convex, the tip obliquely truncate. Nostrils broadly elliptical, aperture of ear elliptical, less than half the height of the head, without operculum. Feet of ordinary length; tarsi and toes feathered. Plumage full and very soft; facial disks complete; a tuft of elongated feathers on each side of the crown of the head. Wings ample, the first quill short, the fourth longest. Tail of ordinary length, rounded.

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 THE GREAT HORNED OWL.

+ BUBO VIRGINIANUS, *Gmel.*

## PLATE XXXIX.—MALE AND FEMALE.

It is during the placid serenity of a beautiful summer night, when the current of the waters moves silently along, reflecting from its smooth surface the silver radiance of the moon, and when all else of animated nature seems sunk in repose, that the Great Horned Owl, one of the Nimrods of the feathered tribes of our forests, may be seen sailing silently and yet rapidly on, intent on the destruction of the objects destined to form his food. The lone steersman of the descending boat observes the nocturnal hunter, gliding on extended pinions across the river, sailing over one hill and then another, or suddenly sweeping downwards, and again rising in the air like a moving shadow, now distinctly seen, and again mingling with the sombre shades of the surrounding woods, fading into obscurity. The bark has now floated to some distance, and is opposite the newly cleared patch of ground, the result of a squatter's first attempt at cultivation, in a place lately shaded by the trees of the forest. The moon shines brightly on his hut, his slight fence, the newly planted orchard, and a tree, which, spared by the axe, serves as a roosting-place for the scanty stock of poultry which the new comer has procured from some liberal neighbour. Amongst them rests a Turkey-hen, covering her offspring with extended wings. The Great Owl, with eyes keen as those of any falcon, is now seen hovering above the place. He has



already espied the quarry, and is sailing in wide circles meditating his plan of attack. The Turkey-hen, which at another time might be sound asleep, is now, however, so intent on the care of her young brood, that she rises on her legs and purs so loudly, as she opens her wings and spreads her tail, that she rouses her neighbours, the hens, together with their protector. The cacklings which they at first emit soon become a general clamour. The squatter hears the uproar, and is on his feet in an instant, rifle in hand; the priming examined, he gently pushes open his half closed door, and peeps out cautiously, to ascertain the cause by which his repose has been disturbed. He observes the murderous Owl just alighting on the dead branch of a tall tree, when, raising his never-failing rifle, he takes aim, touches the trigger, and the next instant sees the foe falling dead to the ground. The bird, unworthy of his farther attention, is left a prey to some prowling opossum or other carnivorous quadruped, and again all around is tranquillity.

Differences of locality are no security against the depredations of this Owl, for it occurs in the highest mountainous districts, as well as in the low alluvial lands that border the rivers, in the interior of the country, and in the neighbourhood of the sea-shore. Every where it finds abundance of food. It is, moreover, an extremely hardy bird, and stands the severest winters of our northernmost latitudes. It is consequently found dispersed over all parts of the United States.

The flight of the Great Horned Owl is elevated, rapid and graceful. It sails with apparent ease, and in large circles, in the manner of an eagle, rises and descends without the least difficulty, by merely inclining its wings or its tail, as it passes through the air. Now and then, it glides silently close over the earth, with incomparable velocity, and drops, as if shot dead, on the prey beneath. At other times, it suddenly alights on the top of a fence-stake or a dead stump, shakes its feathers, arranges them, and utters a shriek so horrid that the woods around echo to its dismal sound. Now, it seems as if you heard the barking of a cur-dog; again, the notes are so rough and mingled together, that they might be mistaken for the last gurglings of a murdered person, striving in vain to call for assistance; at another time, when not more than fifty yards distant, it utters its more usual *hoo, hoo, hoo-e*, in so peculiar an under tone, that a person unacquainted with the notes of this species might easily conceive them to be produced by an Owl more than a mile distant. During the utterance of all these unmusical cries, it moves its body, and more particularly its head, in various ways, putting them into positions, all of which appear to please it much, however grotesque they may seem to the eye of man. In the interval following each cry, it snaps its bill, as if by way of amusement; or, like the wild boar sharpening the edges of his tusks, it perhaps expects that the action will whet its mandibles.



The food of the Great Horned Owl consists chiefly of the larger species of gallinaceous birds, half-grown Wild Turkeys, Pheasants, and domestic poultry of all kinds, together with several species of Ducks. Hares, young Opossums and Squirrels are equally agreeable to it, and whenever chance throws a dead fish on the shore, the Great Owl feeds with peculiar avidity on it.

It is one of the most common species along the shores of the Ohio and Mississippi, where it is to be met with at all seasons, being fond of roosting amongst the thick-growing young cotton-wood trees and willows, that cover the muddy sand-bars of these noble streams, as well as in the more retired woody swamps, where the gloomy cypress spreads its broad arms, covered with dangling masses of Spanish beard, which give way to the gentlest breeze. In both such situations I have frequently met with this Owl: its body erect, its plumage closed, its tufted head-feathers partially lowered, and its head half turned and resting on one shoulder.

When the sun shines brightly, the bird is easily approached; but if the weather be cloudy, it rises on its feet, at the least noise, erects the tufts of its head, gives a knowing kind of nod, flies off in an instant, and generally proceeds to such a distance that it is difficult to find it again. When disturbed while at roost on willows near a river, it sails off low over the stream, as if aware that by so doing it renders its pursuit more difficult. I once nearly lost my life by going towards one that I had shot on a willow-bar, for, while running up to the spot, I suddenly found myself sunk in quicksand up to my arm-pits, and in this condition must have remained to perish, had not my boatmen come up and extricated me, by forming a bridge of their oars and some driftwood, during which operation I had to remain perfectly quiet, as any struggle would soon have caused me to sink overhead.

Early in February the Great Horned Owls are seen to pair. The curious evolutions of the male in the air, or his motions when he has alighted near his beloved, it is impossible to describe. His bowings, and the snappings of his bill, are extremely ludicrous; and no sooner is the female assured that the attentions paid her by the beau are the result of a sincere affection, than she joins in the motions of her future mate.

The nest, which is very bulky, is usually fixed on a large horizontal branch, not far from the trunk of the tree. It is composed externally of crooked sticks, and is lined with coarse grasses and some feathers. The whole measures nearly three feet in diameter. The eggs, which are from three to six, are almost globular in form, and of a dull white colour. The male assists the female in sitting on the eggs. Only one brood is raised in the season. The young remain in the nest until fully fledged, and afterwards follow the parents for a considerable time, uttering a mournful sound, to



induce them to supply them with food. They acquire the full plumage of the old birds in the first spring, and until then are considerably lighter, with more dull buff in their tints. I have found nests belonging to this species in large hollows of decayed trees, and twice in the fissures of rocks. In all these cases, little preparation had been made previous to the laying of the eggs, as I found only a few grasses and feathers placed under them.

The Great Horned Owl lives retired, and it is seldom that more than one is found in the neighbourhood of a farm, after the breeding season; but as almost every detached farm is visited by one of these dangerous and powerful marauders, it may be said to be abundant. The havoc which it commits is very great. I have known a plantation almost stripped of the whole of the poultry raised upon it during spring, by one of these daring foes of the feathered race, in the course of the ensuing winter.

This species is very powerful, and equally spirited. It attacks Wild Turkeys when half-grown, and often masters them. Mallards, Guinea-fowls, and common barn fowls, prove an easy prey, and on seizing them it carries them off in its talons from the farm-yards to the interior of the woods. When wounded, it exhibits a revengeful tenacity of spirit, scarcely surpassed by any of the noblest of the Eagle tribe, disdaining to scramble away like the Barred Owl, but facing its enemy with undaunted courage, protruding its powerful talons, and snapping its bill, as long as he continues in its presence. On these occasions, its large goggle eyes are seen to open and close in quick succession, and the feathers of its body, being raised, swell out its apparent bulk to nearly double the natural size.

GREAT HORNED-OWL, *Strix Virginiana*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. vi. p. 52.

STRIX VIRGINIANA, Bonap. Syn., p. 37.

GREAT HORNED-OWL or CAT OWL, *Strix Virginiana*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 124.

GREAT HORNED-OWL, *Strix Virginiana*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. i. p. 313; vol. v. p. 393.

Upper part of the head brownish-black, mottled with light brown, the tufts of the same colour, margined with brown; face brownish-red, with a circle of blackish-brown; upper parts undulatingly banded and minutely mottled with brownish-black and yellowish-red, behind tinged with grey; wings and tail light brownish-yellow, barred and mottled with blackish-brown and light brownish-red; chin white; upper part of throat light reddish, spotted with black, a band of white across the middle of fore neck; its lower part and the breast light yellowish-red, barred with deep brown, as are the lower parts generally; several longitudinal brownish-black patches on the lower fore neck; tarsal feathers light yellowish-red, obscurely barred.

Male, 23, 56. Female, 25, 60.





*Great Horned Owl.*



Audubon, John James. 1840. "Great Horned Owl, *Bubo virginianus*, Gmel. [Pl. 39]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 1, 143–146. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319152>.

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