

## **Making Ripples**

### **Owls: Mystery of the Night**

by Amanda Bancroft

If god had eyes, they would be Great Horned Owl eyes. Owl eyes are so big that there isn't room inside their skulls for the muscles that move the eyeballs, so owls must turn their whole head to see in a different direction and have a total 270-degree field of vision! Large, nonchalant, and intelligent, these mango eyes blink beneath eyebrows that give Great Horned Owls a stern expression. And for most creatures, owls are something to take seriously. Owls are carnivores and have a diverse diet of rodents, mammals, fish, birds, reptiles and insects. They are nocturnal, which makes them seem mysterious to us diurnal creatures. But that doesn't mean you'll never see one at dusk or dawn, or perhaps roosting during the daytime.

Burrowing owls and short-eared owls are even active during the day. Here are three common owls in Northwest Arkansas:

Eastern Screech Owls come in gray or red morphs, or some combination. They are small woodland owls and can sometimes be found along Washington Avenue in Fayetteville. Most of their hunting occurs in the first four hours after dark. They breed from mid-March to mid-May, with an elaborate courtship ritual involving a lot of head-bobbing from the male. They mate for life. The female lays two to eight eggs typically in a tree cavity. Eastern Screech Owls can live over twenty years in captivity but have much shorter lives in the wild since everything, from other owls to Blue Jays, likes to eat them or their eggs.

Barred Owls, also known as hoot owls, are among only four species with dark eyes. They're highly vocal and can be heard during the day or night. They have rounded heads with gray-brown feathers and white vertical and horizontal bars. They care for their young for at least four months, which is a long time for owls. Barred Owls are medium in size and have to worry about aggression from the larger Great Horned Owls while being potential competitors to the endangered Spotted Owl as the Barred Owls range further west. They can live over thirty years in captivity and about ten years in the wild.

Great Horned Owls are well-known for the two tufts of feathers on either side of their head which are neither horns nor ears. Their coloration varies, with shades of black, white, gray, or reddish brown, with their facial disc having a slightly orange hue. Because of their size, these owls can prey on house cats and even skunks! They commonly hunt at dusk. The female is usually bigger, and in January or February she lays two to four eggs of which she is very protective. Great Horned Owls have been known to aggressively defend their nestlings. They can live over thirty years in captivity, but about thirteen years in the wild. Judging from their eyes, though, you might think they're immortal.

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