



## **Brunswick Wildlife The Great Horned Owl**

Suppose you came home and not only had someone taken over your house but wrecked it beyond repair! An Ocean Isle hawk will soon be facing a similar situation. The Great Horned Owl mother and owlet pictured are in a nest formerly owned by a Red-tailed Hawk.

Great Horned Owls do not build their own nest and prefer to take over Red-tailed Hawk nests or nests of other hawks, crows, ospreys, or squirrels since it breeds earlier than those species.

The first picture was taken on March 3 and the second was taken on March 12, showing an amazing growth spurt in between. Sometime between these dates, the nest was not just treated roughly, it was accidentally destroyed. The March 12 picture shows the owlet walking on the limb where the nest once was.

Great Horned Owl eggs are generally laid in late December and January. There are usually of two eggs in the clutch and the incubation period is generally thirty-three days. Unfortunately, the sibling of this nestling died after falling from the tree.

Males bring food for females while the females are incubating the clutch of eggs and, after hatching, while females are in the nest with nestlings, males make several trips a night to feed both.

On March 12, the mother was still with the baby but twenty or so feet away. She flew in after daybreak. The baby can now regulate its temperature, freeing the female to also hunt. While the little one is almost ready to take flight, the adults will feed and protect it until Fall.

Before its mother returned, the baby emitted a short screech approximately every thirty seconds to let its parents know its location. When the mother flew in she sounded a short,

soft “whoooo” and the baby went wild. It screeched and flapped its wings...a begging behavior typical of most species of birds.

The “hoot owl” is found across a very wide range in North America, Mexico, and portions of Central and South America...in deserts, grasslands, forests, suburban, and other ecosystems below arctic and alpine tree lines. These owls are fairly common but wide spread since they require a large territory.

Sometimes the male and female may be seen hooting at each other from a distance, leaning over into each hoot! This courtship and bonding duet usually begins a month or two before the eggs are laid.

Great Horned Owls are nocturnal perch-and-pounce hunters...with large eyes equipped for night vision and keen hearing assisted by facial disc—feathers that direct sound into their ears. It has the broadest diet of all North American owls...it even preys on other owls. Its grocery list might include snakes, frogs, scorpions, small rodents, insects, rabbits, ducks, geese, and herons. Tasty!

If you live near a stand of tall trees, you too may be treated to such an owl experience. Listen for the duet. If you find an owl nest, look under the tree for pellets regurgitated by the owls...pellets containing the bones, feathers, fur, and hair of prey. Watch for the food deliveries by the male and the other events in the unfolding of this wonderful process of nature.

John Ennis