

A Cold Courtship

Does the dead of winter sound like a good time for a bird to nest? It does for a great horned owl! Great horned owls are the earliest nesting owls. In Colorado, they usually begin courting and staking out their nesting territory in January!

In order to find a mate and establish territory, great horned owls do a lot of hooting. Most calling occurs from dusk to about midnight and then again just before dawn. Males and females hoot to each other. The resonant hoots—"hoo-hoo hooooo hoo-hoo"—can be heard over several miles during a still night and are a classic sound of the wild. When a pair of owls is hooting, one can tell the sex of each by their pitch. The female has the higher pitched voice.

The great horned owls courtship involves more than just calling to each other. When they get close they bow to each other with drooped wings. They rub each others bills and preen each other.

Once they have decided to be a couple, great horned owls find a nest. They do not build a nest of their own but use the nests of

other large birds or squirrels. Sometimes they use hollows in trees or abandoned buildings to nest. Great horned owls do not add anything to the place they choose, but just settle in and start laying eggs. Usually, they lay two or three eggs, but some pairs have lain as many as six!

Both the male and female incubate the eggs for 30–35 days. When they hatch, the young are fed by both parents. Great horned owls fiercely defend their nest site against intruders and will attack the intruder until it is killed or driven off.

