

# The Great Horned Owl

by Darcy Fowler

"Hoot-who! Who-who-who!" floats through the night air, as a Great Horned Owl calls to his mate. Shortly, a dark shape launches itself from the tree to glide silently across the field after prey. This was my first experience with a Great Horned Owl in its natural habitat - our south field.

Since then, I've learned a lot more about these beautiful creatures. If you get a chance to see Oscar, the Great Horned Owl, at one of Las Aves' outreach programs, you'll be amazed at how large they can grow. He is about average for his species, which grows to 18-25 inches tall, has a wingspan of about 5 feet, and weighs in at around three pounds, with the females being a little larger.

New Mexico is but a small part of their territory. Oscar's cousins can be found in virtually all of North and South America. Brown, spotted with darker brown, white throat feathers contrasting with dark cross-barred underparts, and with the beautiful feather tufts on his head, Oscar is typical of the plumage of both sexes of the New Mexico branch of the family. This coloring can vary, depending on habitat. His desert and arctic relatives are paler, while those living in dense forests are darker.

If Oscar could hunt for himself, he would prey mainly on small mammals, but his kind have been known to eat any small animal they can catch, even insects. They have even been known to take domestic cats. The nest in the top of a cottonwood tree, where Oscar was found, is typical of these owls. They often take over old high nests of other birds such as red-tailed hawks, eagles, herons or crows. However, they can sometimes be found nesting in rocky cliffs, and occasionally on the ground.

Baby owls are the most vulnerable to natural predators, especially in the 9 to 10 weeks between hatching and when they start to fly. During this time, their only protection is their parents. If they were to fall out of the



Dr. Kathleen Ramsay with Oscar

nest, they would be easy prey for coyotes, dogs and cats. While in the nest, they are vulnerable to anything that can get to the nest, but especially other birds such as eagles. Once they are grown, their size and formidable beak and talons leave them little to fear, except for humans.

After the fledgling owls leave the nest, their parents continue to feed them for several weeks. If you see young owls on the ground, watch carefully for several hours before assuming they have been abandoned. Later, after the fledglings have learned to fly well, they will follow their parents, hounding them with hunger cries. The parents will ignore the fledglings, to encourage the young to begin hunting on their own.

Finally, they learn to hunt for themselves. They will stay with the family group over the winter, and only leave in the spring when the next nest is started. Two years later, it is time to find a mate and start a new family. Owls court their mates in the winter and early spring. In New Mexico, the 2-3 eggs are usually laid in January to February. Both parents sit on the eggs for the month of incubation. This early nesting season means that the young owls are learning to hunt while other birds are still on their nests, and are easy prey for the young owls. This nesting

strategy is partially responsible for their success in populating both American continents in a variety of terrain.

You may have noticed that Oscar has not been mentioned in the last few paragraphs. His career as the "Great Horned Hunter" was cut tragically short when someone turned a shotgun on his nest. His three siblings were killed; Oscar survived but with only 80% of his flying ability and minimal tear-producing glands in one eye. A human could cope quite well, but these disabilities keep Oscar from being able to hunt for himself.

So, Oscar has taken on a new career at Las Aves, as foster parent to the baby Great Horned Owls that come in the clinic each spring. His prime duty is to keep the baby owls from imprinting on humans. Learning to trust humans is not the best training for survival in the wild. Oscar has helped Las Aves raise about 60 owl chicks, who were then released in the wild. In addition to helping raise baby owls, Oscar also helps with the outreach program. Needless to say, he is the star of the program, and he knows it. He has also helped raise funds by appearing in a TV advertisement in the Winter Olympics.◊