

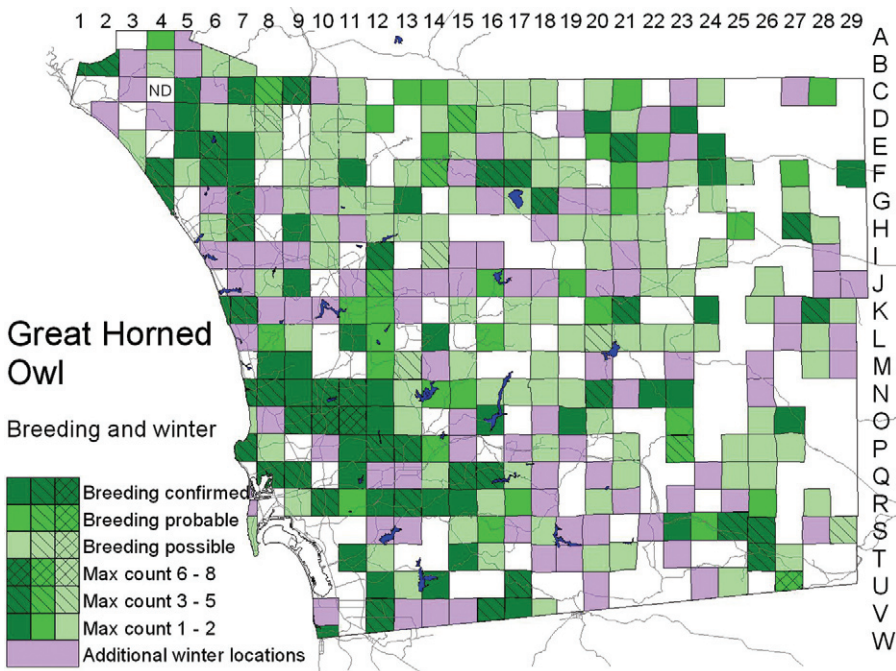
Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus*

The Great Horned Owl is San Diego County's most widespread owl, a year-round resident in all parts of the county. It lives in all types of woodland and in any open scrub growing over rugged topography. It nests wherever there are old hawk or raven nests, be these in trees, on cliff ledges, or on buildings. In spite of being such a large bird, naturally living in well-dispersed territories, the Great Horned Owl appears to be maintaining its numbers and distribution in the face of urbanization.

Breeding distribution: Great Horned Owls are found nearly throughout San Diego County, from the coast to near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20; pair 19 May 2001, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt) to the floor of the Anza-Borrego Desert. A birder traveling on foot seldom encounters more than one pair or family per day, so the species is best termed uncommon, though it is relatively numerous for a large bird of prey. Regions where the

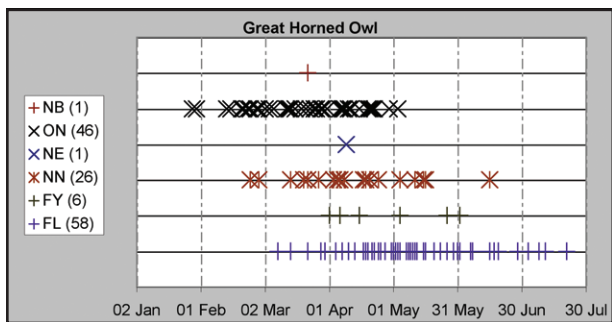


Photo by Anthony Mercieca



Great Horned Owl appears especially plentiful are Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve (two active nests in square N8 on 19 April 1997, L. Ellis) and Miramar Air Station (eight in square O10 and another eight in O11 on 24 February 1999 (W. E. Haas). In the Anza–Borrego Desert the species is sparser than on the coastal slope but still confirmed nesting in the Borrego Valley, in badlands, and on steep rocky slopes.

Nesting: The Great Horned Owl does not build its own nest but typically takes over old nests of other large birds. Starting to nest in midwinter, the owl gets a head start over other species that might want to reuse these nests. Rarely does the Great Horned Owl make any effort to refurbish its nest, and we noted this behavior just once, at the north end of Blair Valley (K24) 22 March 2001, where the owls were adding to a nest they had used the previous year (R. Thériault). Known builders of nests we observed Great Horned Owls using were the Common Raven and Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks. The Great Horned Owl also lays its eggs on ledges of cliffs or buildings where there is no preexisting nest; one nest that fledged two young in Poway (M11) in 1998 was on the second-story window ledge of a medical center, situated so a person could see it only by standing on the desk of a psychiatrist’s office (E. J. McNeil).



Great Horned Owls often begin nesting as early as late January, occasionally even earlier. Our earliest occupied nest was 28 January; nestlings on Air Station Miramar on 24 February 1999 (W. E. Haas) must have hatched from eggs laid no later than the third week of January, and a fledgling in Lopez Canyon (N8) 8 March 1999 (B. C. Moore) implies a nest initiated in late December. The latest pairs lay in early April, and many young fledge during that month. The nesting activity we observed from 1997 to 2001 was thus consistent with the 28 January–13 April spread of 67 egg sets collected in San Diego County 1890–1943, and a female collected 6 January 1963 with a fully developed egg in her oviduct (A. M. Rea).

Winter: The Great Horned Owl is nonmigratory in southern California, and its breeding season overlaps much of the winter defined by our survey protocol. The species is probably resident in all the atlas squares where we noted it in winter but not spring or summer, the difference being due to variations of our nocturnal effort rather than to movements of the owls themselves. Also, the birds call most consistently early in their breeding season, which means mid to late winter. Sites of notable concentrations recorded in winter were Pamo Valley (J15; up to eight on 3 January 1998, W. E. Haas) and Boden Canyon (J14; up to six on 2 January 1999, C. R. Mahrdr, R. L. Barber).

Conservation: There is no evidence for change in the Great Horned Owl’s abundance through San Diego County history. The species fares surprisingly well in cities, though it is less common there than in rural or natural areas. Buildings offer new nest sites, and some of the other birds that supply the owls with nests are thriving in the urban environment. Great Horned Owls, like other nocturnal birds, are more subject than diurnal species to being killed by moving cars, so increasing traffic threatens them. Offsetting this factor is society’s improved attitude toward birds of prey in general, so shooting of the owls is less frequent than in the past.

Taxonomy: San Diego County lies in the zone of intergradation between *B. v. pacificus* Cassin, 1854, and *B. v. pallascens* Stone, 1897. A few specimens are the darker *pacificus*, buffier and more heavily barred, especially on the feet. Others, even near the coast, are as pale (gray and white) and lightly barred as any *pallascens*. Most are intermediate between the two. The one specimen from the desert slope (San Felipe Valley, 22 December 1993, SDNHM 48720) is *pallascens*. For more details, see Rea (1983) and Unitt (1984).