

# OUTDOORS

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## + Have you heard about the great horned owl?



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I have always been a morning person, before the trials and tribulations of the day have had a chance to ruin your mood. By the time sunset comes around, I'm usually too tired to enjoy it. Mornings start out fresh and clean, like a do over for yesterday.

Dawn is the best part of the morning, or al-fajiri, as it is known in Africa. To be more specific, I like the katika jioni, the brief period of twilight between darkness and the crimson explosion of the pending sunrise.

It is this twilight period that my wife and I usually take our dogs for their morning romp. The morning romp is much



This is the owl that hung around our house last December. Great horned owls are a fairly rare sighting in Colorado. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

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It is this twilight period that my wife and I usually take our dogs for their morning romp. The morning romp is much more pleasurable during the summer months but the canine children insist, rather demand, that the walk be taken regardless of climate conditions.

One bitter December morning, as we edged down the snow packed driveway, I was startled by the unmistakable "hoo, hoo, hooooooooo" call of a great horned owl. Since their call can be heard for several miles, it took me awhile to locate him high in a cottonwood tree near the creek bottom.

For several days that old owl greeted us every morning at around the same time. Eventually I was able to locate him easier, and one morning he actually let me get close enough to have a "Kodak moment" with him. He hung around our house for better than a week; just long enough to turn a few of the local rabbit population into owl snacks, before finding digs elsewhere.

Even though the great horned owl is the most common species of owl in Colorado, sightings are really not all that common. Colorado Parks and Wildlife has been able to document great horned owls in every Colorado state park. I have not even been to all the parks in our state so the owl is beating me there.

Colorado has 14 very different species of owls living here, but not all of them nest here. Each species has its own unique traits, with very significant differences in size, calls, appearance, habitat, diet and behavior. Besides the hoo sound, great horned owls can bark, whistle, cry and give a wavering cry.

The smallest owl in our state is the flammulated owl, measuring only 6 inches tall. These little guys live in the mountains from April to October, and then head off to Central America for the winter. They are strictly nocturnal and perch close to the tree trunks to blend in, so people seldom see them. I know I have never seen one.



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In contrast, we have the great horned owl that is the largest species of owl in Colorado, and the largest of the tufted owls in North America, with a wingspan of 5 feet long. They get their name from the feathers on their head that look a lot like horns.

These feather horns, called plumicorns are not actually horns, but do resemble them. They are not ears either, as some people think. In fact, their true function is not known. They may be some type of camouflage or a way to communicate.

Those horns definitely make the owl look like a tough guy. Whenever an owl is stressed or threatened, he will fluff up his feathers, lower his head and make hissing and clacking sounds, all to enhance his tough-guy appearance.

Great horned owls have an incredible beak; big and sharp so they can tear their food apart. While the beak is intimidating, the most dangerous part of the owl would have to be those long talons at the end of each toe.

All birds of prey have four toes, with three facing forward and one facing backwards. Owls and osprey have the unique ability to move their outer front toe to also face backwards when needed. This aids their ability to hold and kill prey, and their ability to hang on in precarious perches. A great horned owl has a grip strength that exceeds the human hand by more than 10 times.

Great horned owls feed on large prey that can include skunks, rabbits, squirrels, large birds like waterfowl and hawks and small pets. If an owl is hanging around your neighborhood, keep an eye on your cats and dogs because an owl will attack one quite handily.

Contrary to the old myth, owls cannot turn their head completely around. They have 14 vertebrae in their necks, compared to the seven found in a human,

that allows them to turn their head about 270 degrees, and even upside down.

The eyes of an owl are incredibly large, taking up 80% of its skull. If the human eye were to compare, it would be the size of a grapefruit. These large eyes cannot move side-to-side, so their entire head must turn in order to have any peripheral vision.

With those big eyes, an owl can see in the darkness a hundred times better than a human being. That excellent eyesight carries over in the daytime also. Add to that keen eyesight their exceptional hearing, and you have the perfect storm of a flying predator.

The males usually begin calling for a mate in December. That is probably what the one in my neighborhood was doing when we heard him.

These owls are the first to nest in the spring but are not really into nest building. They will usually just crash into an existing nest, like the nests of red-tail hawks from the previous season. Both parents will help incubate the eggs, and the babies will hatch by March. The young stay in the nest for six weeks before beginning to fly.

I enjoy my pre-dawn jaunts with the dogs, and seeing wildlife like that owl, enhances the spirit. My Jack Russell terriers weigh in around 20 pounds each and I'm not sure how they would fare in a bout with a great horned owl. I keep their leash close because I don't want to find out.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email [info@mcspi.org](mailto:info@mcspi.org).

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