

# The Great Horned Owl Mystery

 evergreenaudubon.org/the-great-horned-owl-mystery

Chuck Aid

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Great Horned Owl (c) Rob Raker

A group of twelve of us devoted the afternoon and evening of Saturday, Feb 16, to looking for owls. Two very full mornings the prior week had been devoted to scouting Bear Creek Lake Park for nesting Great Horned Owl sites, and one nest with an incubating female had been found and viewed from afar a couple of times. In recent years there have been up to five pairs of nesting Great Horned Owls in the park, so some degree of success had been anticipated, though finding only one occupied nest was somewhat discouraging.

However, with the knowledge of the location of this one nest, we approached it confidently and were on the lookout for the attendant male which could be anticipated to be close by. Well, not only did we never see an attendant male, but the female had vacated her nest. A subsequent look half-an-hour later confirmed her absence.



Great Horned Owl female on nest (c) Rob Raker

So, what happened?

Before delving further into this mystery let's get a few owl facts on the table. Great Horned Owls can have the same mate for several years in a row, and the two often remain on the same territory year-round. In Colorado courtship can begin in December, and occupied nests have been observed as early as mid-January. The period of incubation is about 33 days, so young can start appearing in nests in mid-February, and young have been noted fledging by early March. Clearly our female was well within that expected time frame of nesting activity.



Great Horned Owl (c) Rob Raker

A nesting female tends to have great nest site fidelity, doing almost all the incubation, and depending on the male to provide her with food (five voles per night seems to do the trick). They have been noted briefly leaving their nest to assist the male in hooting contests to defend their territory against a Great Horned intruder, or when their food needs exceed his capacity to provide, but these are rare instances. Furthermore, these moms can successfully incubate their eggs even when the ambient temperature is as low as  $-28^{\circ}\text{F}$ .



This was not our Great Horned Owl, but certainly provides evidence that adults can live in jeopardy (c)  
Rob Raker

Now, back to our mystery. Sometimes owls are killed by owls of the same species, or by hawks or crows. This doesn't appear to happen often, and we regularly see Red-tailed Hawks, who nest later in the season, being in close proximity to active Great Horned Owl nests. My working hypothesis, since I've seen evidence of this with a couple of raptor species, is that something happened to dad, and mom wasn't able to sustain the nesting effort on her own. Or, maybe she was out hunting at 4:15 in the afternoon, and we just missed her – but that's highly unlikely. The nest looked abandoned. Assuming she is still in the neighborhood, she may yet successfully nest this season, either with the same male if he still exists, or perhaps with a new partner. A return visit to the apparently abandoned nest is definitely in order to verify observations to this point.



Northern Saw-whet Owl (c) Mick Thompson

Having been cheated of an owl-on-the-nest observation we proceed to take an evening stroll in the foothills, and while out under the stars and waxing gibbous moon we were treated to the calls of a duetting pair of Great Horned Owls, and the distant call of a single Northern Saw-whet Owl. It was a bit windy and chilly, but a beautiful night nonetheless.