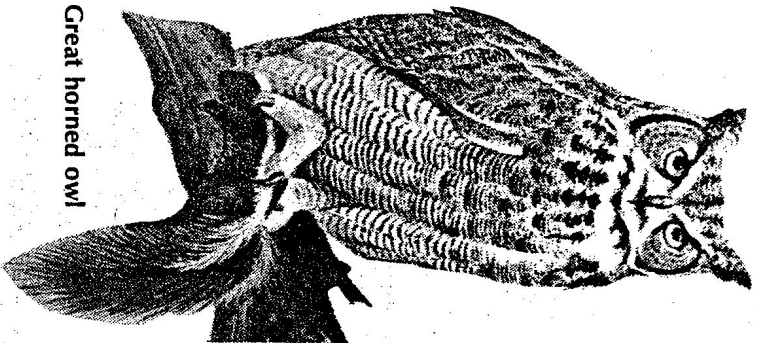


Nocturnal great horned owl works graveyard shift

by Bert Edises

Faster than a speeding bullet,
More powerful than a locomotive,
Able to leap over tall buildings at a single bound,
It's ... Superman.



Great horned owl

No, the great horned owl can't really match Superman. But he's probably the deadliest bird for his size in the entire Southwest.

Like all owls, his flight is noiseless, so the victim is unaware of the presence of danger until it's too late. The first notice of this predator's attack comes when two steel-like claws are clamped onto the unfortunate animal's neck and back. At that point the game is over, although once in a while a snake will turn the tables by winding itself around the owl's body and choking it to death.

What is this creature, who pound for pound will outfight almost any other living thing? Owls are nocturnal birds of prey, with large heads, flattened faces which form "facial disks," and large eyes which are fixed in their heads so that the entire head must be moved to enable the bird to see in a different direction. There are 134 species of owls in the world, 18 of them found in the American West.

One of these western species is the great horned owl. His diet consists of rodents, rabbits, birds, reptiles, fish and large insects, although he will tackle animals as large — and smelly — as skunks.

The fact that he hunts by night, when most birds and animals are unable to see, and that he has the knack of silent flight, means that his potential victims are, for the most part, helpless and terror-stricken. Only man and the larger

politan," which means that he is found in most parts of the world and under varied ecological conditions. In the Western hemisphere he ranges from the Arctic to the Straits of Magellan at the tip of South America.



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man mammals are undaunted by the hovering presence of this ferocious bird.

The great horned owl varies in color from dark brown to sandy brown. It measures about two feet from tip of beak to tip of tail and has a wingspread of up to five feet, making it the largest "horned" owl in North America.

Besides its "horns" (which are actually ear tufts), it can be identified by its yellow eyes, its conspicuous white throat collar and the horizontal barring on its belly.

It will nest in an old heron's or hawk's nest, and if that is not available, in a tree, pothole, cliff, river bluff, or even on the ground. His call is the familiar "hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo."

As for his range, the great horned owl is one of those highly successful birds described by ornithologists as "cosmo-

How the owl's, ruthless predators all, have gained a reputation for wisdom is hard to understand. The explanation, I think, lies in the bird's appearance. Look at the picture of an owl, any owl. At first glance he resembles an English Lord Chancellor, wrapped in judicial robes and frowning at the gravity of the legal problem under consideration. Notice the large, luminous eyes; they are surrounded by disks of radiating feathers which lend them an air of studious intelligence. Folklore has elevated this solemn appearance to wisdom, though there is not the slightest scientific evidence that an owl is any smarter than, say, a magpie.

Having discussed the largest, it is only fair that we turn now to the smallest of all owls, the elf owl. When his length of five in-

ches is compared with the great horned owl's 22 inches, it is clear that we are dealing with a tiny creature, the size of a sparrow.

But it would be a mistake to confuse smallness with weakness. The elf owl is still very much a predator, as his feeding habits prove. In the desert these tiny owls become expert at killing scorpions as food for their young. They always remove or at least crush the poisonous stinger before delivering it to the young birds. No "chicken" here.

In conclusion, have you ever wondered how owls and hawks can live in the same region, perch in the same trees, kill and eat the same kinds of birds and animals, without fighting and mutual destruction? The answer is that the hawks work the day shift and the owls the night, so they seldom get in each other's way.