



Nature Journeys

By Vince Pinto

February's Ferocious Owls

Which state boasts the most owl species? Arizona! We boast an impressive 12, of all shapes, sizes, and habits. February is an excellent month in the Sky Islands to see several species that either leave our area in warmer months or that become less visible once trees and shrubs begin to leaf out in spring.

Perhaps the best known and certainly one of the most common Arizonan and North American owls is the great horned. Most people probably have seen and/or heard this species at some point during their life. Growing up by Penny-pack Park in Philadelphia, I was treated annually to nightly choruses of *hoo-ho-ho-hoo-ho* emanating from not only the woods but also my own backyard. Even in the rather icy wintry realm of Philadelphia these large owls begin courtship in December, rendering them highly vocal. You're most likely to hear one there just before dusk. Listen carefully and you may hear the muffled, doglike sounds of this "hoot owl."

Here, too, we are treated to breeding great horns in winter. Initiating the breeding cycle this early helps to ensure that the owlets hatch at a time when

sufficient prey is available—in March and April, when mammal and bird numbers rebound from the lows of winter. The Arizona diet of this nighttime equivalent of the red-tailed hawk includes such varied fare as mice, shrews, tree squirrels, skunks, house cats, other owls, roosting turkeys, and just about anything



Long-eared owl

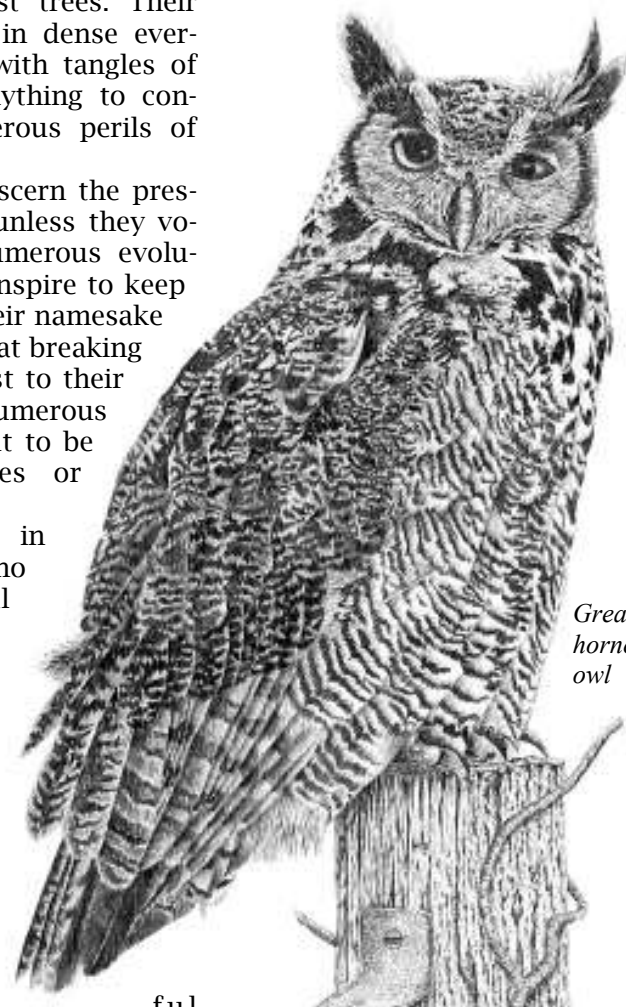
else they can lay their formidable talons on. They have even been known to prey upon red-tailed hawks, who sometimes return the favor during the day. Look for the remains of prey—mostly in the form of regurgitated pel-

lets—beneath favorite roost trees. Their perches are often located in dense evergreen or deciduous trees with tangles of vines and/or branches—anything to conceal them from the numerous perils of daylight hours.

It may be difficult to discern the presence of awesome hunters unless they vocalize, as they possess numerous evolutionary adaptations that conspire to keep them camouflaged. Even their namesake "horns" are feathers aimed at breaking up their outline. I can attest to their efficacy, having spotted numerous false "owls" that turned out to be only the broken branches or trunks of trees.

Coming down a notch in size are long-eared owls, who likewise sport terminal feather tufts that are neither horns nor ears. They, too, use their mottled brown and gray coloring as a disguise to help them find food and avoid predation. Unlike great horned owls, long-eared owls are here only for the winter, so they are scarcer than other owls. I have only seen them on a handful of occasions. Once, in Whitewater Draw, a well-known Arizona Game and Fish wildlife management area, I spotted one low in a dense willow thicket. Otherwise, they seem to like dense stands of oak and juniper.

In fact, long-eared owls gravitate to these sites with such regularity that you may encounter them every winter at their favorite roosts. Once you have located such a place, you should wait there at dusk in hopes of seeing what appears to be a giant moth gracefully plying the dim sky. If you are quite lucky, as I have been at times, you may see that owl joined by 10 or more others on their way to terrorize any



Great horned owl

number of small prey species and to delight your eager eyes!

Vincent Pinto and his wife, Claudia, run Raven's Way Wild Journeys. They offer local tours dedicated to the preservation of the incredible biodiversity in the Sky Islands.

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