

BIRDTracks®

"Who's Awake? Me too!" by JOHN SCHAUST

Look at the title of this article and read it out loud a couple of times. Say it slowly and draw the words out a little. Go ahead—try it!

Congratulations, you have just learned the typical five-note call of one of the most powerful and dominant raptors of the night sky—the Great Horned Owl.

In owl language, the call sounds something like *whooo...whoo-hoo.... who..who*. During the breeding season, pairs of Great Horned Owls will often perform this call in a duet that starts around dusk and may last for more than an hour. If you are lucky enough to have a pair near your home, you can separate who is who by listening for the female's higher pitched and slightly faster song.

Odds are good that you do have a pair of these large and long-lived owls living nearby. Able to thrive in virtually any habitat found in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, they are equally at home in wilderness or suburban settings. This amazing diversity is the result of their superior physical and behavioral adaptations which enable them to survive under almost any condition.

Superbly adapted for hunting at night with large "night vision" eyes, acute hearing, silent flight, and strong talons, it is the rare item of prey that can escape the clutches of a Great Horned Owl. And it's not picky about what it eats! It has the most varied diet of any North American hawk or owl and



JOE FUHRMAN

Great Horned Owls may weigh two to four pounds. Those in the northern part of the continent can weigh about twice as much as their southern cousins.

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Snowy Owls and Other Predators

by DAVID BIRD

The Winter of 2011–2012: a Banner Year for Snowy Owls

It is being described by raptor researchers as “unbelievable” and the “most significant wildlife event in decades.” They are referring to the large numbers of snowy owls that have blessed the landscapes of southern Canada and well into the United States, from Montana to Massachusetts to as far south as Missouri. The large, white owls, which stand two feet tall with a wingspan of five feet, generally breed on the treeless tundra of the Arctic stretching from Alaska to Greenland. Denver Holt of the Owl Research Institute, who has studied snowy owls for decades, says the rare mass southerly irruption is linked to the cycles of lemmings—the owl’s princi-

pal prey item—in the far north. A plentiful supply of the small rodents this past breeding season resulted in larger than normal broods of the owls, and the number of fledglings virtually doubled. The resulting competition for food among the owls led many of the younger birds, especially males, to head south to hunt rodents in “greener pastures.” Even if the snowies seem to be plentiful this winter, Holt believes the world population of the popular owl is in overall decline, likely due to the impact of climate change on the tundra grasses that lemmings feed upon.



Birds In Depth

Courtship in Favorite Backyard Birds

by DR. DAVID BIRD

It’s always fun watching hapless males try to get hooked up with a gal. Male birds don’t have it any easier than human males do—they have to work to make it happen. Here is a little guide to some of the courtship strategies used by male birds in six of our favorite backyard birds.

• **Northern Cardinal.** Because cardinals are nonmigratory, a pair may remain together on the breeding territory for the entire year. The frequency of “divorce” is about 10 to 20 percent, so the males do have to perform some courtship displays to keep their partners interested. In the lopsided display, the male spreads his wings, keeps his feathers and his head crest flattened, and twists his body so as to display his breast. If she is not impressed with that, he might try the song-dance display, where he remains more upright and erects his crest. With a little singsong, he sways back and forth. And if that doesn’t work, he can always resort to the song-flight display. Fluffing out his breast feathers and erecting his crest, he sings and descends upon the female slowly with short, rapid wing strokes. The old standby is offering little tidbits of food to the receptive female.

• **Black-capped Chickadee.** Depending on where you live, chickadees can form a pair bond at any time of year. Although the bond can last for years, the divorce rate can reach as high as 15 percent in some populations. Despite years of observation, we know little about the courtship displays of the Black-capped Chickadee. Although the female might receive as much as 50 percent of her food from the male, it may have little to do with courtship. Both birds are fairly silent in the early stages, and then later on females will quiver their wings and issue a broken version of the *dee* part of their famous *chicka-dee-dee-dee* call. Little or no visual display is made prior to mating, but sometimes the male might use the “gargle” call, perhaps the most complex of all of their vocalizations and the one least likely to be recognized by bird watchers. The female may engage in wing-quivering for a few seconds after mating.

• **American Goldfinch.** Goldfinch males have to work a little harder both to obtain mates and to keep them. Not only do females appear to select their mates after springtime arrival, there’s a fair bit of mate-switching during the breeding season. To get the female’s attention, the males might engage in two main courtship flights. In the butterfly flight, two or more singing males fly level in slow, interlocking circles for about 10 to 30 seconds some 75 to 100 feet above the nesting habitat. The moth flight, more often associated with

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Despite their handsome good looks, male American Goldfinches have to work extra hard to capture the attention of the ladies.

DAVE MENKE/USFWS

Snake Bans to Help Birds

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has banned the importation and interstate transportation of four non-native constrictor snakes: Burmese Python, Yellow Anaconda, and the Northern and Southern African Pythons. The release of these snakes by irresponsible pet-owners and animal dealers into sensitive bird habitats is posing a significant threat to the future of some bird species, as well as other wildlife in the United States, particularly in the Everglades. People buy the snakes only to realize later that keeping a snake several feet long inside their house or apartment is not such an attractive idea. Sadly, the pet-owners' solution often is to release the snakes into the wild, where they breed readily and prey upon on native wildlife not accustomed

to dealing with such threats. These four snakes have been listed under the Lacey Act as injurious wildlife. In a recent intestinal examination of 56 captured Burmese Pythons in or adjacent to Everglades National Park, 50 were found to have eaten multiple bird species, including White Ibis, Limpkins, King Rails, and Clapper Rails. Other python species released into the wild have killed and consumed endangered Wood Storks. Millions of government dollars have been spent to combat the spread of the reptiles.

Birds on the Menu for Sharks

Scientists at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab in Alabama made an unexpected discovery when studying the diets of Tiger Sharks in the Gulf of Mexico—birds showed up with a surprisingly high frequency in their digestive systems. And not

just seabirds—land-based birds such as woodpeckers, tanagers, meadowlarks, catbirds, kingbirds, and swallows were among the species found. How would a land bird end up in a shark's stomach? The answer may be the large numbers of night-migrating birds attracted to brightly lit oil and gas platforms, which today number more than 6,000 in the Gulf. These attractions occur most often on cloudy nights, when thousands of migrating birds mistake the platform lights for the stars by which they navigate. When the birds circle in confusion, they often crash into the platform or fall exhausted from the sky into the water. One solution may be the application of bird-friendly lighting strategies, which have been successfully used to reduce bird fatalities in other places such as oil and gas platforms in the Netherlands and at the 9/11 Memorial in New York City. 🏠

Frequently Asked



Q: Mourning Doves, Barn Swallows, American Robins, and House Finches nest in our yard, often several times a year. Are they always the same birds that use the same nests, and how many times will they nest each year?

A: The species you mention are strongly disinclined to use vacant nests built by other birds, even if of the same species. Robins and finches build their own nests over old nests. So a good site might be used by the same pair, different pairs, or different species.

A moderately sized brood—three or four nestlings—inevitably compromises the structural integrity of a nest, compelling the adults to build a new structure for each nesting attempt. A single nestling can be reared with virtually no damage to the nest structure, making it suitable for a second use.

Regarding the doves, robins, and finches, in any given population some percentage of pairs will nest once, some two or three times, and a minuscule fraction will attempt four nestings. Barn Swallows are mostly single-brooded, with some double-brooding.

Warm climates and lower altitudes stretch the nesting seasons; cold climates and higher altitudes shrink the nesting season. So geography influences the mix of percentages: Robins high in the Rocky Mountains or far north are more likely to nest once or twice, whereas southern or low-elevation robins are more likely to nest two or three times.

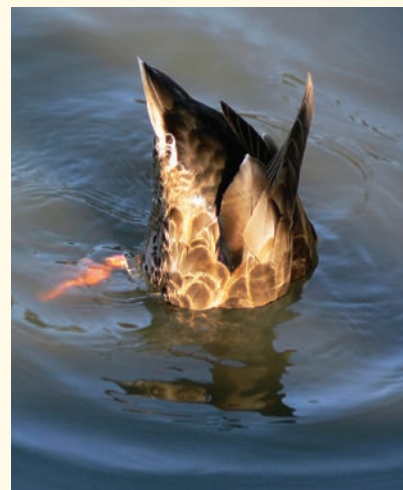
Age and experience also matter. Birds that have successfully reared young are far more likely to nest multiple times within the same season.

Q: We live in a neighborhood with a pond where we see ducks putting their heads under water then splashing with their feet. What are they doing?

A: Some ducks feed by diving underwater, where they find everything from plants to snails and fish. Other ducks feed on the surface, where they skim fruits and seeds, insects larvae, and crustaceans.

These surface-feeding ducks will also take food from the bottom in shallow water. They particularly go after snails, the shells of which provide calcium that female ducks need for egg production.

When the ducks splash the water with their feet, they are compensating for their natural buoyancy so they can work the bottom for the food they want. 🏠



A diving duck in action can be a strange sight indeed.

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Top 10 Long-awaited Signs of Spring

by BILL THOMPSON, III

By the time you read this, spring may have a firm grip on your local area, but as I write it's still winter here in southeastern Ohio. Each winter, spring seems a little slower to arrive than in past years. Or perhaps it's that I'm longing for it more as I get older.

Here are my top 10 long-awaited signs of spring. These are, of course, the signs that I see here on my farm near Whipple, Ohio. Your signs might be totally different. But I hope these will help you think about, or become more aware of, your own signs of spring.

10 Songbird songs. The first species that I noticed tuning up this year was a Tufted Titmouse singing *Peter, Peter*, *Peter* in our orchard on a sunny Sunday afternoon in late January. His song was my first aural reminder that winter will eventually fade. Since then I've heard House and Purple Finches, White-breasted Nuthatches, Northern Cardinals, and Song Sparrows.

9 Clumps of raptors/pairs of raptors. Last weekend we went out birding with the kids, and we saw 10 Red-tailed Hawks in four hours. Some of these are our local year-round residents, some are winter visitors, and some are birds of passage, returning north to set up territories. Late winter and early spring are excellent times for raptor watching. Many of our resident Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawk pairs are already courting each other, complete with acrobatic flights, dives, and piercing screams.

8 Owls hooting. Hawks aren't the only raptors making noise. Our evenings are punctuated with hoots from Great Horned and Barred Owls. If we listen carefully at dusk we can hear Eastern Screech-Owls whinnying far off in our east woods. Owls can be hard to hear if you don't get outside to listen. Late winter is the best time to catch the concert of hoots, because many owl species are setting up territories and starting the breeding cycle. Spend an hour outside right at dusk, listening quietly, and you might tune into a little night music.

7 Trees and flower buds. Our water maples and red maples are the first trees to show signs of budding. In a few weeks the bare, lifeless branches will offer a reddish glow—the effect created by the thousands of growing red buds at the

end of every twig. Soon every living tree in our woods will be about to burst into leaf. When the budding is at its fullest, we know the Blue-gray Gnatcatchers will be here soon.

6 Duck flights. As the Great Lakes begin to open up and ice disperses, we get skeins of ducks coming up the Ohio River Valley. It's so exciting to take a Sunday drive along the rivers and past the ponds in our area, because each one offers a chance to see the first stunning drake Bufflehead, Ring-necked Duck, or even a Northern Pintail. Our first spring ducks are often the hardy Mallards and Black Ducks, followed closely by the impressive Wood Ducks. One of these years we hope to put a pond on our property, so we might lure some waterfowl to stop and rest.



A male Red-headed Woodpecker stakes out his territory.

5 Woodpeckers drumming. On our farm we hear woodpeckers drumming in early spring and it continues until the following fall. Woodpeckers are drumming both as a territorial announcement and as a part of spring courtship. Some suburban woodpeckers have discovered the great resonance of chimney flues and drainpipes, much to the dismay of slumbering human homeowners. Among our drummers are Pileated, Red-bellied, Hairy, and Downy Woodpeckers, and Northern Flicker. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers tap our birch trees each spring but do not stick around to breed. And Red-headed Woodpeckers (my favorite birds) nest in a small colony just a couple of miles away.

4 Juncos leaving. Although we'll have a few with us until early May, by late February, our junco numbers are slowly dwindling. I'm always fascinated by these little grayish wonders that seem to be with us no matter how bad the weather, all winter long, scratching out seed bits from under our feeders. This species is a notable "get" for our spring Big Day list in early May, when a late-lingering junco may visit our feeder, and for our Big Sit day in early October, when the first junco of winter magically appears at our feeders. Before they leave, our juncos sing and jostle around our yard with increasing intensity, practicing for the coming breeding season.

3 Peepers. One night soon I'll be making my way from the garage to our front door (a walk of about 100 feet) and I'll hear that high-lonesome sound of spring. No it's not a Bill Monroe bluegrass ballad, it's the evening chorus of spring peepers—those tiny cold-hardy amphibians that sing from every wet patch of ground in the woods. Peepers start vocalizing so early in spring they might be more accurately called late-winter peepers. Hearing them lets us know that ground is thawing and the springs are starting to flow.

2 That spring smell. I love to inhale the earthy spring smell that the land produces in late February and early March. It's equal parts rain and soil, grass and ozone, creating a perfume that no amount of chemical wizardry can replicate. Julie and the kids often catch me standing in the front yard at dusk, nose pointed skyward, eyes closed, breathing deeply. It's heaven.

1 Woodcock. It's often when I'm coming in from the garage, at the end of a workday, perhaps when I'm smelling the spring air, or listening to the first spring peepers, that I hear the first *peent!* of our American Woodcock male. He's a tough old coot, often starting his spring performances when there's still snow on the meadow and ice in the valleys. But he knows that the early male woodcock gets not only the earthworms, but also the gals. We cherish the evenings we spend listening to his nasal calls and watching his silhouette against the pink western horizon as he spirals skyward and twitter-tumbles back to our old meadow. Of all the signs of spring we see each year, he's our favorite! 🏠

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COURTSHIP IN FAVORITE BACKYARD BIRDS—Continued from page 2

an already formed pair, is much shorter and involves rapid hovering behavior near dense cover. Courtship feeding entails the males giving food to a crouching, wing-fluttering female, who makes faint begging calls.

♦ **Mourning Dove.** Most people can recognize that famous mournful *coo-OO, oo, oo, oo* call made by males from conspicuous perches as they try to attract a female. Some males might have up to a dozen special cooing perches within a single territory. Watch for males engaging in an aerial display known as the flapping-gliding flight. The male leaves his cooing perch while vigorously flapping and noisily clapping his wings. The wingtip extension is quite pronounced and they actually touch together at the apex of each wingbeat. He'll rise as high as 100 feet or so, extend his wings, holding them quite still below the plane of his body, make a long, spiraling glide for a complete circle, and then add a series of flaps and glides just before alighting on the same perch or perhaps another. If the female likes what she sees, she'll land beside him and the two begin a series of display movements.

♦ **House Finch.** Male House Finches are capable of beautiful songs ranging from four to 40 syllables and lasting a couple of seconds. The func-



tion of these songs is unclear among ornithologists, so resist the temptation to assume that the males sing to attract a female. Male House Finches must, however, work hard to attract a female because as many as 40 percent of males remain unattached in various populations. With this species, at least, being chosen by a female may have much to do with diet and looks. According to both laboratory and field experiments, females prefer to pair with the most brightly colored males available to them. The redder the male, the better! To acquire the red plumage color, the male must take in plenty of carotenoids, which are pigments found in plant parts. By choosing well-fed

The male Downy Woodpecker does a combination of courtship moves including drumming, tapping, and dancing through the trees to attract the female (pictured).

males, females acquire mates that may be more attentive to the nest and might even pass on good qualities to her offspring. Coloration aside, the male also can try a version of the butterfly flight described above.

♦ **Downy Woodpecker.** Males often perform drumming to attract females. Steady and staccato-like, a burst might last about one second and occur 9 to 15 times per minute. Drumming is not to be confused with tapping, another courtship behavior that consists of 9 to 10 taps at roughly four taps per second. Once a male gets a female interested, he shows off his flight skills. Yes, it is another version of the butterfly flight—in the case of the Downy Woodpecker, it is the most spectacular courtship to see. Look for it on sunny, warm days. The male and female chase one another in dance-like fashion through the trees by holding their wings up high and flapping them slowly like butterflies or even bats do. Sometimes the flight is level and other times it might be in long, deep loops. 🦉

DONNA DEWHURST/USFWS

WHO'S AWAKE? ME TOO!—Continued from page 1

has been known to feed on invertebrates, fish, amphibians, reptiles, and even other birds. A wide variety of mammals, including skunks and porcupines, makes up the largest portion (up to 90 percent) of its typical diet.

But life for the Great Horned Owl is not always easy, especially in the early months. Mortality rates during the first year of life can range from 30 to 60 percent depending on local food conditions. But, if a fledging owl can survive to become an adult, it has the longest potential life span of any species of owl in North America. Bird banding studies confirm numerous owls living well into their 20s, with the record bird being 28 years old.

Great Horned Owls are regular visitors to residential parks and backyards. Take a few moments this spring to step outside after dusk to



Great Horned Owls nest earlier than any other bird of prey in North America.

GEORGE GENTRY/USFWS

A special *BirdTracks* edition from



In every issue of *BirdTracks* we feature questions from you, our best customers.

We welcome your suggestions, comments and questions. We also hope to share your tips and ideas for enhancing our enjoyment of backyard birds and wildlife with other *BirdTracks* readers all over North America.

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WHO'S AWAKE? ME TOO!—Continued from page 5

indeed see if they are still awake, too! To check the accuracy of your newly-learned imitation of the Great Horned Owl's call, visit

allaboutbirds.org to hear a great audio clip.

Remember practice makes perfect! 🏠

Great Horned Owl Fun Facts:

- The Great Horned Owl has the largest distribution of any North American owl.
- It takes almost 30 pounds of force to open the closed talon of a Great Horned Owl.
- Great Horned Owls nest earlier than any other bird of prey in North America.
- Great Horned Owls have been known to successfully incubate eggs at temperatures below -20° F.
- Great Horned Owls use the widest variety of nesting sites of any bird in North America, but most often reuse old nests of hawks, crows, and squirrels.
- Great Horned Owls are believed to be truly monogamous and form long-term pair bonds that may last their lifetime.

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