

Owls In The Village at Castle Pines

Owls are one of the most popular birds on the planet, and it is easy to understand why. We feel a kinship with their round faces and forward facing eyes. They excite our interest as they glide through the night and fill the air with mysterious sound.

There are two common species of owls in The Village at Castle Pines, the Great Horned Owl (GHO) and the Northern Saw-whet Owl (NSO). One of the largest owls in North America, the GHO can be heard year-round making its deep “who-WHOO-WHOO-WHOOO” call. It is approximately two feet long, with an average wingspan of four feet and can weigh up to five and a half pounds. Because of its size and that it is most active at dawn and dusk, the GHO is commonly seen, swooping to catch rabbits and rodents near roads and open grasslands. Few owl species build their own nests, and GHOs rely on using established nests of squirrels or other raptors, or laying their eggs on the surface of a sheltered cliff or rooftop.

The Northern Saw-whet Owl (NSO) is almost as common in the Village as the GHO, however it is seldom seen. With a length of only seven inches, it is one of the smallest owls in North America and is active only in the full darkness of night. Its mechanical, high pitched “too-too-too” call is often mistaken for a man-made alarm! NSO’s eat mainly small rodents, however they will supplement their diets with bats, small birds and insects. This tiny owl nests in existing small cavities in trees and will also take advantage of carefully placed man-made nest boxes.

More Fun Village Owl Facts:

Most owls have unique feathers that enable them to fly silently. Wing feather surfaces have a velvety texture, with serrations on the leading (front) edge to help break up turbulent air, and soft fringe on the trailing (back) edge to further absorb and soften sound waves. GHOs and NSOs also have large wings relative to their body mass to help them carefully control their flight speed. They rely on stealth when hunting, silently gliding and pouncing on their unsuspecting prey.

Owls have specially adapted low-light vision, with a different kind of light cells than humans do, and pupils that open especially wide in the dark. Their eyes are so large relative to the size of their skull, they are unable to move them within their sockets and therefore have to rely on moving their heads in order to bring objects

into focus. A GHO can turn its head well over 180 degrees. Most nocturnal owls have limited ability to see in color, as it is not useful to them for nighttime predation.

GHOs and NSOs have highly sensitive hearing, with the ability to hear prey beneath snow and earth. They hear with special feathers on their facial disks that catch sound and direct it to their ears, which are holes hidden beneath their feathers on the side of their heads.

GHO's are an especially successful owl species because they are strong, fierce predators and are willing to choose from a wide variety of prey. In addition to an array of large birds and small mammals, they will also hunt smaller birds, reptiles, amphibians and even fish. Most birds do not have highly developed senses of smell, especially the GHO. One of its favorite foods is skunk. If you're looking for a GHO nest, follow your nose!

One of the few predators of an NSO is a GHO.

Listen for concentrated bird alarm calls if you're looking for an owl in the daytime. Diurnal birds will often group together and harass owls in hopes of encouraging them to move away before nightfall. A group of constantly cawing crows might mean a GHO is nearby, a group of smaller chickadees and nuthatches might mean an NSO.

Usually, the larger the raptor, the longer they live. A GHO might live for almost 30 years, while an NSO may only live 7 to 9 years.

Female raptors are often larger than males, and this is certainly true with the GHO, however the male has a deeper sound when it makes its calls.

Here are links to hear the calls of our owls...

Great Horned Owl:

<https://www.audubon.org/news/can-you-recognize-call-great-horned-owl>

Northern Saw-whet Owl:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwgTcxjLnTo>