

Flying Tigers

By Amanda Goble

A look at who's celebrating the New Year

Stand on your doorstep on a chilly night this month and listen closely. If you're lucky, you'll hear it: a few times each minute, a low and powerful series of resonant hoots. It's unmistakably an owl (or two), invisible in the darkness—sometimes sounding close enough to touch. But what kind of owl is in your trees?

It's not just any owl. It's a *big* owl. Let's meet the flying tiger of the forest.

The owner of the midnight *basso profundo* is the great horned owl, *Bubo virginianus*. That voice in your backyard belongs to the largest, most impressive owl in the Southeast, a bird that outclasses every other owl in the region. In fact, it outweighs every North Carolina raptor, save the bald eagle.

A bird of prey this impressive has an impressive appetite to match. Cartoon owls are wise, but real great horned owls are ferocious and bold predators. They are large enough to take most other woodland animals as prey, but they don't limit themselves to meals on the ground. Great horned owls have exquisitely silent flight and can take sleeping birds or squirrels right out of the trees in pitch darkness. They manage this with an exceptional combination of night vision, shockingly powerful talons, and outstanding hearing. Their beauty and intimidating presence is icing on the cake. The "horns" of a great horned owl are actually just feathers, which the owl can raise and lower at will.

These superbly designed nocturnal predators are called "tiger owls," or "flying tigers," in some areas. In countries that observe the lunar calendar and zodiac, 2022 happens to be the Year of the Tiger, so people all over the world are now celebrating the year of that brave and beautiful cat. But is having a flying tiger in your neighborhood worth celebrating?

Absolutely. Hearing a great horned owl in the trees by your home is a wonderful sign that your neighborhood is connected to nature and that rodent pests are still under control even in the winter, when snakes are asleep. Have no fear, however; your pets are *not* on the menu for this mighty bird. Raptors are experts that instinctively avoid preying on fellow predators and can recognize that your cat or small dog isn't for breakfast. Instead, they prefer rats, mice and rabbits. Great horned owls are the nocturnal division of your local pest control service, and right now is nesting season, so they are pulling double shifts to reduce the number of pests in your home and garden.

That's right; great horned owls nest and lay eggs during the coldest, darkest time of year. That's part of why you may hear them hooting right around the New Year. Flying Tigers have a sweet side: great horned owls bond strongly and work together to raise the kids. The deep, powerful hoots in your backyard woods come from both males and females as they check in with one another and claim hunting territory. The females are larger, but the males have the deeper voice, and if you listen closely you can even tell them apart.

Raising a family in the middle of winter might seem strange, since most other birds make nests in spring and summer. But these owls have a strategy: the strong, skilled parents hunt and keep the youngsters warm and fed during the hard winter season. The young owls will fledge from the nest when spring



Great horned owl—Photo by Peter May

arrives and food is plentiful. That's a good thing, because young raptors can be pretty bad at hunting. It takes practice to develop the skill to be a real Flying Tiger.

Your neighborhood owls are working overtime right now to stay warm and feed their owlets. You can help them out by not removing trees or disturbing wooded areas at this time of year—and whenever you can, plant more trees on your property. Owls will use them as scouting locations during their hunts, and you will benefit by having fewer mammal pests near your home or garden.

If you do need to control pests, steer clear of poison baits. If an owl or other raptor eats a mouse or rat that has wandered outside with poison in its system, the bird most likely won't survive. Rodent bait is convenient for people, but bad news for our feathered friends. Use simple snap-type or live-capture mouse traps inside your home for an owl-friendly solution (and definitely avoid those awful sticky glue traps, which inhumanely trap all sorts of beneficial small wildlife, including lizards, songbirds and snakes).

Next time you are outside after dark, bundle up against the cold and listen closely. You might just hear a pair of flying tigers ringing in the New Year in the quiet of the night.

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