



## Owlets born in early spring

By Kerri Savage

Our noble provincial bird, the Great Horned Owl, is truly an early bird! These large birds of prey, which are easily identified by their horn-like feathery tufts, are early nesters, often laying eggs in February. They lay eggs earlier than all other birds in Alberta.

These majestic owls lay their eggs in abandoned nests - those of squirrels, hawks or crows - but will also find cozy homes in hollow trees. Female owls, which are much larger in size than their male partners, lay one to five eggs (five is rare), which hatch on average in 30 to 37 days. This is a long time for bird eggs to hatch, which is why great horned owls mate and nest early using their large size and numerous feathers to keep the eggs warm. The young owls, called owlets, are covered with down and leave the nest in six to nine weeks.

Great horned owl pairs mate for life and share the responsibility of raising and tending to the owlets. Males will bring food to the female, mainly mice, rabbits, squirrels, skunks, other smaller birds and even house cats. Crows, fox and raccoons are their only natural predators, stealing eggs and the young owlets from the nests. Great horned owls never move far from the area in which they were born.

The eyes of the great horned owl are nearly the size of those of humans! Their large, luminous yellow eyes do not move in their sockets – this is why owls need to turn their heads to see. They can move their heads up to 270 degrees, but not all the way around!

The great horned owl can be found in every corner of the province, living in both open and wooded areas, in cities and rural areas. They do not migrate but choose to stay in wooded areas throughout the winter and during the breeding season.

According to the Alberta government's website, in 1977, Alberta children were asked by the government to choose a bird to represent the province. As the result of the vote, the great horned owl was selected as our official Provincial Bird.