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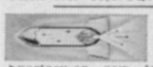

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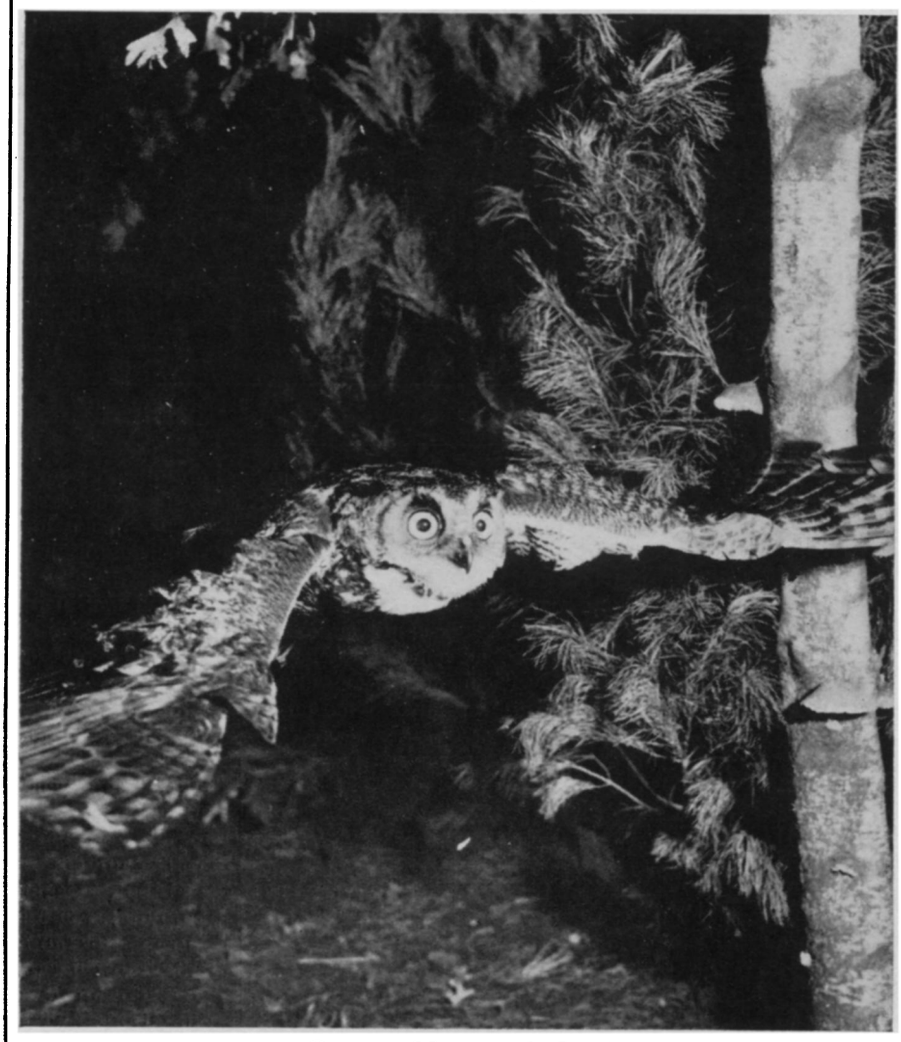

Great Horned Owl

As dusk falls in the woods, a figure awakes, opens wide binocular eyes, yawns, and silently, gracefully flies through the gathering darkness. This is the time of the owl, a species of birds that are mainly evening and night hunters. Of all the birds of prey, which includes some 400 species, owls constitute about one-third. The rest—the hawks, eagles, falcons and vultures—are mainly creatures of the day.

But the night belongs to the owl. With two huge light-gathering eyes facing straight forward, and hypersensitive ears which are great long slits down the side of their faces, the owls are successful hunters of the most cautious mouse, shrew or rabbit in dark shadows of the forest. Unlike the powerful hawks and their noisy swishing wings, owls make their deadly descents on silent wings; their feathers are fringed with down.

The eyes of the owl are truly remarkable, capable of very sharp focusing at various distances. These eyes are fixed in bony sockets, so owls must turn their whole head to see an object. An extra number of neck vertebrae enable these birds to rotate their heads through an arc of 270 degrees. Man and hawks, both of which also have binocular vision, can turn their heads only 180 degrees.

The Great Horned Owl, Bubo virginianus, is the most powerful of all owls, and also the largest, with a length of some 23 inches. It has a very fierce disposition, which shows itself even when the bird is very young. These owls have a long life-span, many living over half a century. One lived in a zoo to the age of 68.

Known also as the Virginia Horned Owl and the Big Hoot Owl, these large creatures have a call of usually five deep, monotonous hoots.

Ranging throughout much of the Western Hemisphere, from the northern limit of tree growth to the Straits of Magellan, this great bird is quite adaptable to various extremes of climates, and has been found in the hot barren deserts of Arizona as well as in the dense forests of California.

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