

14

Great Horned Owls and versatility

In North and South America the Great Horned Owl is ubiquitous (see Figure 14.1). They are the size of a Powerful Owl and as widespread as the Southern Boobook is in Australia. Why is the Great Horned Owl so widespread while the similar-sized Powerful Owl is limited to coastal and subcoastal Australia?

The day temperature in Winnipeg rose to -10°C , and locals used the break in cold weather to picnic. One family drove to the park. With a flip of their mittens, they dusted snow off the wooden seats and tables, spread out chicken, bread, a thermos of coffee, canned drinks for the kids and ate lunch in the wintry sunshine.

A minibus from the owl conference travelled on the plains outside Winnipeg to Oak Hammock Marsh, a wetland for migratory waterfowl now covered with ice. With binoculars on their laps, they rubbed clear spots in the foggy windows to see their first Winnipeg owl. Four owls are common there in mid-winter – the Great Horned Owl, Snowy Owl, Great Grey Owl, and Northern Hawk-Owl. White countryside was broken by occasional clumps of naked grey willow and dark conifers. A long-tailed magpie dipped low over the snow and skittered along the top of a wooden fence. In a mixed bunch of deciduous and conifer trees sat a Great Horned Owl. It sailed out of the tree and pitched up in a conifer, apparently hunting in broad daylight.

The Great Horned Owl's scientific name, *Bubo virginianus*, is derived from the Latin *Bubo*, for a horned or hooting owl, probably in reference to its low-pitched hooting call, but maybe from the Greek *buzo* 'to hoot' and *buas* 'horned owl'. The species name, *virginianus*, is Latin for Virginia, a southern state in the US.