

A GREAT HORNED OWL KILLED BY A RED FOX

Although Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) food habits are known, (Rusch, Meslow, Doerr, and Keith, J. Wildl. Mgmt., 36: 282-296, 1972) information concerning predation on owls is decidedly lacking.

I discovered the frozen carcass of a Great Horned Owl while tracking a red fox (*Vulpes fulva*) through a large marsh near Portland, Dodge County, Wisconsin at 10:30 on 7 February 1975. The temperature was -18°C and 76 cm of snow, 72 hours old, was on the ground. The tracks were made within the previous 12 hours and indicated that the fox was moving slowly north. The tracks led to a dead, adult-size Great Horned Owl, which was found lying on its back beneath a 10m willow (*Salix* sp). The owl's left wing was fully extended, while the right wing remained partially folded. A large number of fox tracks, intermixed with drag marks from the owl's wings, were trampled into an area approximately 8m² surrounding the owl carcass. The fox had apparently seized and dragged the owl around this disrupted area before releasing it. The owl appeared to be in good condition (no protruding keel was noted) but a small amount of blood was frozen next to the left eye. Frozen blood was found on the talons of both feet. A cone-shaped column of blood, located under the owl's head, was found frozen to the ground when the bird was picked up. A few breast feathers were found next to the carcass; no other parts of the owl were missing. After finishing with the owl, the fox again slowly headed north. At 16:40, I brought the owl to the Animal Health Laboratory of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture in Madison, Wisconsin for a post mortem examination by a veterinary diagnostician. Results indicated that trauma from a bitewound was the cause of death. Bitewounds punctured the left eye and skull behind the right ear opening. There was hemorrhaging into the ear cavity and the brain itself; apparently this injury caused death, and did not follow it. The owl's proventriculus was filled with a large mass of hair, feathers and bird feet.

It seems highly unlikely that an adult-sized owl, full of food and in apparently good health, would attack a full-grown red fox; however this possibility cannot be dismissed. The only evidence of a struggle was the blood found on the owl's talons, which may have been in response to the fox's attack on the grounded bird. However, when I continued to track the fox after its encounter with the owl, no bleeding was noted near any of the fox tracks. Although the post-mortem exam indicated that the Great Horned Owl was in good physical condition with the exception of the fox-inflicted wounds, I believe that the owl was on the ground for an unknown reason, when it was attacked and killed. This encounter demonstrates that a Great Horned Owl can be susceptible to predation by foxes, if the owl remains on the ground for any length of time. — Charles M. Pils, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 3911 Fish Hatchery Road, Madison, Wisconsin 53711.