

GREAT HORNED OWL SUCCESSFULLY REARS FOUR YOUNG IN THE CRESTON VALLEY, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Great Horned Owl is a common resident of the Creston valley, British Columbia. It occupies a variety of habitats throughout the region such as agricultural lands, wetlands, rural and urban residential areas, and mixed coniferous forests. The most utilized habitat is the extensive deciduous riparian black cottonwood (*Populus balsamifera*) stands along Boundary Creek, Goat River, Old Goat River channel, Duck Creek, and the Kootenay River system.

In British Columbia, this widely distributed owl initiates nesting from late February through late March (Campbell et al. 1990b). In the Creston valley, Great Horned Owl nesting activity has been recorded as early as 5 February but peak nesting occurs from mid to late March (L.M. Van Damme unpublished data).

On 5 March 2006, a Great Horned Owl nest site was discovered in a natural hollow created by a major branch breaking off the primary trunk of a mature 17 m tall dead black cottonwood tree. The hollow, situated on the west side of the main trunk, was 14 m from the ground. The cottonwood tree had a diameter at breast height of 117 cm and was located in the Corn Creek Marsh within the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area. Three young fledged from this nest site on 9 May 2006 (Figure 1).

The nest site was checked again during the 2007 breeding season and was found to be active. On 15 May, it was a surprise to observe four nestlings at the cottonwood hollow (Figure 2), although only one was active outside the hollow. By 18 May, all four nestlings were actively climbing out of the hollow and flexing their wings. Developmentally, the feathers on the back, tail and wings were well developed but the head and body still had a downy appearance. The actual fledging date for all young is unknown.

In British Columbia, the brood size for Great Horned Owls ranges from one to four young with



Figure 1. These three young Great Horned Owls successfully fledged a week after this photo was taken. Creston, BC. 3 May 2006 (Linda M. Van Damme).

54% having two young. Out of the 203 broods recorded for the province only three (< 1.5%) had four young (Campbell et al. 1990). It is not known if any of these nests successfully fledged all young (R.W. Campbell pers. comm.).

In the Creston valley the occurrence of broods with four young is similar to the provincial average. Of the 103 broods I have documented in the valley since 1997 this is the first with four young (< 1.0%).



Figure 2. After quietly sitting for 20 minutes observing this Great Horned Owl family, a fourth nestling shyly peers out from behind its two siblings. Creston, BC. 15 May 2007 (Linda M. Van Damme).

Literature Cited

Campbell, R.W., N.K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J.M. Cooper, G.W. Kaiser, and M.C.E. McNall. 1990. The birds of British Columbia: Volume 2 – nonpasserines (diurnal birds of prey through woodpeckers). Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, BC. 636 pp.

About the Author

Linda is enthusiastic about the natural world and is always learning.
