

The Great Horned Owl

by Arthur Scott Bailey

Billy Woodchuck knew that the Great Horned Owl was a dangerous person. His mother had often told him that. But he had never yet seen the Great Horned Owl; and Billy wondered how he should know him if he should ever happen to meet him. So Billy Woodchuck went indoors and asked his mother to tell him how the Great Horned Owl looked.

“He’s a big fellow,” said Mrs. Woodchuck—“almost as big as the Great Gray Owl and the Snowy Owl. But you can tell him from them by his ear-tufts, which stick up from his head like horns.”

“What color is he?” Billy inquired.

“Buff and black,” Mrs. Woodchuck answered. “He’s mottled—that means about the same as spotted,” she explained. “I’ve heard him called the ‘tiger among birds.’ But whether it’s because of the spots, or because he’s so fierce, I really don’t know.”

“Maybe it’s *both*,” Billy suggested.

“Perhaps!” his mother said. “He has a deep voice,” she continued. “And he calls ‘*Whoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, whoo, whoo!*’ If you heard him in the woods you might almost think it was old dog Spot barking. But when he screams”—Mrs. Woodchuck shuddered—“*then* you’ll know him. For his scream is the most dreadful sound that was ever heard.”

“I wish you would scream like him once,” said Billy.

“Bless your heart!” said his mother. “My voice may not be very sweet, but I never could screech like him.”

“Why doesn’t Johnnie Green shoot him?” Billy asked. “If he only would, the Great Horned Owl could never trouble us any more.”

“Why, there’s more than just *one*!” his mother exclaimed. “When I say ‘the Great Horned Owl,’ I don’t mean just *one*!”

“Oh!” said Billy. That was different. And then he went out to play again.

For a long time he couldn’t get the Great Horned Owl out of his mind. Every time he heard the leaves rustle in the trees he jumped as if forty Great Horned Owls were after him. But since nothing of the sort happened, at last he forgot all about that danger. It was late in the afternoon when a horrid call sent him scurrying off:

“*Whoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, whoo, whoo!*”

Billy Woodchuck was sure that the Great Horned Owl had found him at last. He ran a little way as fast as he could; and then he crouched down in the grass.

Again came that deep, long-drawn call. It sent Billy off on another short run.

And after that had happened three times, he was so scared that he thrust his head under a heap of dried leaves. So long as he couldn't see the Great Horned Owl, he thought that the Great Horned Owl couldn't see him.

Then Billy heard his mother's voice. She was calling him. And he looked up quickly. There she was, right beside him!

"Did you drive him away, Mother?" he asked.

"Whom do you mean?" she inquired.

"Why, the Great Horned Owl!" Billy said.

"I was the only one that called," she told him. "I wanted to see what you would do. And I must say, you behaved very foolishly. Don't ever cover up your head like that. First, you must try to get away. And if you should get caught, remember that your teeth are sharp. But they won't be of any use to you with your head buried under a pile of leaves."

Billy Woodchuck saw that he had a great deal to learn. But he was glad that his mother had taught him that much, though he was ashamed that he had been so silly.

Source:

Bailey, Arthur Scott. "The Great Horned Owl." *The Tale of Billy Woodchuck*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1916. 24 – 28. Electronic.