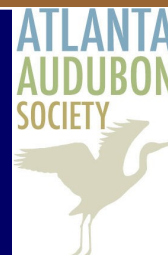


All About Owls

Part of Atlanta Audubon Society's *Learning About Birds* curriculum series.



Owls are birds of prey that are mainly nocturnal or active at night. They are stealthy stalkers that use their superior sight and hearing to track prey in the dark.

Owl Optics

Unlike most birds, owls' eyes face forward like human eyes. In order to see in different directions, owls have to turn their heads. In fact, owls can swivel their necks so far that it appears they have eyes on the backs of their heads! With both eyes focusing on one object, owls use binocular vision to see. They can also use **telescopic vision**, or the ability to see objects very far away because of the way the bones in their head are arranged.

Owls have haunting yet beautiful faces. Their large eyes are each surrounded by feathered **facial disks**, or depressions on the face that help direct sound to the ears. The ears on an owl are large holes located behind their eyes and are covered by feathers.

Fluffy Feathers

Owl feathers are soft and fluffy on top and have tiny bristles along the edges. This muffles the sound created by a flapping wing and allows owls to better take their prey by surprise. Most owl **plumages**, or feather patterns, are dull, earthy colors that provide excellent **camouflage**, or the ability to blend in



Barred Owl by Darlene Moore

Tenacious Talons

Owls depend on their feet for catching and clutching prey. They have four strong toes with sharp talons. These toes are very flexible; they open widely to grasp moving prey and one toe can even go from facing forward in flight to facing backwards to better grip things! The legs and feet are often covered in feathers to trap heat, help owls better sense their prey, and protect the owl from injury due to struggling prey.

Who's



I make a harsh, shrilly shriek, "Kssccccchh!"



Barn Owl

You may recognize this owl from books or movies. Barn owls are known for their white, heart-shaped faces with dark eyes. This bird gets its name from its preferred nesting area, a barn or old building. They live in open habitats like farmlands or grasslands. Barn owls have the best hearing of all owls. In fact, they hunt their prey, such as rodents, snakes, and



I sound like I'm yelling, "Who cooks for you! Who cooks for you-aalllll!" or "Hoooo-aawwww!"

Barred Owl

This large owl with dark eyes is found in woods, swamps, and suburban areas. It hunts rodents, rabbits, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. The barred owl has a very round, distinct facial disk. Its plumage is heavily streaked. This owl is known for being very LOUD and sometimes sounds like a monkey that got loose!



I have a typical low owl hoot, but am rather quiet compared to my relatives

Great Horned Owl

The Great Horned Owl is a common owl throughout North America. It is very large with bright yellow eyes and "horns," or a bunch of feathers sticking up on the head called **ear tufts**. This owl lives in all different types of habitats and is known for catching larger prey such as cats, skunks, crows, hawks, and even other owls!



I make a loud, eerie whinny that rises and falls in pitch or one long

Screech Owl

At a mere 8 or 9 inches tall, it is hard to see a screech owl, but many roost and nest among humans. A screech owl may have reddish or grayish plumage. It has ear tufts that can be lowered and hidden on the head. This owl is less common but can be found in many different habitats hunting for small mammals, amphibians, and insects. It is a true cavity nester and will occupy a nest box built by people.



Chippy Challenge

Owls are an important part of an ecosystem's food web. Create a food web with at least two of the owls you read about above.

Birds that hunt for food must capture, kill and quickly swallow their prey. The entire meal, bones and all, is swallowed in one or two big gulps! Birds have a **two-part stomach**. The first part is like a human stomach; strong substances called stomach acids digest some of the food. Much of the soft, nutritious meat from the prey is digested here.

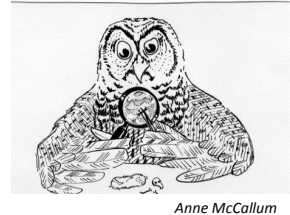
The second part of a bird's stomach is called the **gizzard**. This part of the stomach takes the place of teeth. It is a strong muscle that grinds and crushes hard pieces of food such as bones, teeth, nails, insect exoskeletons, fur, and feathers. The hard parts that cannot be digested are formed into an elongated ball called a **pellet**. A typical pellet takes from 12 to 20 hours to form in the bird's gizzard. Once formed, this pellet of slimy, hard material is regurgitated when the bird leans forward, opens its mouth, and throws it up. It takes about five minutes to expel a pellet. Generally two or three pellets are produced per day. They can be found on the ground below the bird's daytime roosting spot.



Small owls, like the Eastern Screech Owl, generally regurgitate pellets of only 1 to 1.5 inches long. Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl, and Barn Owl pellets are often 2 to 3 inches long. Owls are not the only birds that produce pellets. Hawks, eagles, and songbirds that eat insects, like American Rob-

Dissecting an Owl Pellet

The contents of an owl pellet tell a story of what a bird has eaten and gives excellent clues to members of the community food web. Equipment you will need: toothpick, tweezers, and magnifying glass.



1. Carefully unwrap the owl pellet on a clean surface. It is okay to touch the pellet with your fingers. Examine the size of the pellet.
2. Gently pull apart the pellet being careful not to break any bones. This is usually easiest to do with your fingers.
3. Using a toothpick, tweezers, or your fingers, carefully separate the bones from the fur or feathers.
4. Roll the last bits of fur gently between your fingers to find little bones or teeth that may have been overlooked.
5. Try to put together the skeleton of the animal you have found in the pellet. Use the chart provided to you to help identify the animal.

- Do you think it came from a small or large owl? What species of owl do you think it is from?

• Which bones of the skeleton did you find the most of? Which bones of the skeleton were missing?

- What type of animal(s) did your owl eat? Use the area below to draw and label the skeleton(s).



Chippy Creative Challenge

Make up a story about the owl whose pellet you just dissected. You have a good idea of what type of owl it is and what it ate. Write a short story or article about this character.