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Owl Prowl



Barred Owl

Owls are birds of prey. That means they hunt and eat other animals. Eagles, hawks, and falcons belong to that group too. But unlike most other birds of prey, most owls are nocturnal—they are active at night. Their nighttime activity, quiet flight, and strange calls have made them the subject of many stories.

There are more than 200 different kinds of owls all over the world, and North America is home to 19 of them.

You may catch a glimpse of one along the side of a highway or hear it call from a tree in a city park or your backyard. The Great Horned Owl is found in every state in the United States except Hawaii. The giant of the owl family here in North America is the Great Gray Owl, which stands more than two feet high. The smallest is the Elf Owl—it's only about five inches tall. There is one thing all owls have in common: They are all excellent predators.

Learning about owls is an exciting adventure, and there are plenty of ways to do it. Some folks listen to recordings of owl sounds. Some watch live owl cams online while others see owls at nature centers. You can read books about owls and learn about them on the Internet. Another place to discover owls is right here in this magazine. Just turn the page and start your adventure!



Words for the Wise

Some birds of prey are nocturnal, some are diurnal, and some are crepuscular. What do those words mean?

Nocturnal:
active mainly at night.

Diurnal:
active mainly during the day.

Crepuscular:
active mainly at twilight, when day is ending and night is beginning.



The Great Gray Owl's yellow eyes give it a fierce look.

The Night Hunter

An owl has all the “tools” it needs for successful hunting in the dark. Special soft feathers allow it to fly with silent wings. The big eyes see in the poor light and the keen ears pick up faint sounds of a small animal scurrying in the leaves. When an owl pounces, its powerful feet and sharp talons capture the prey.



A faint noise in the dark... Where is it coming from?

The screech-owl turns its head so the round disks of its face concentrate the sound and move it toward the ears. Hearing the sound a second time, the owl pinpoints the source and starts the attack.



The owl springs from its high perch.

With special wing feathers muffling the sound, the owl flies silently toward the noise. Its eyes, adapted to see at night, detect the movement of a small animal on the ground.



Swooping low, the owl zooms in on its prey.

The owl raises its strong wings, which now work like brakes. At the last second, its powerful legs and feet shoot forward. The sharp talons pierce the body of a field mouse, killing it instantly.



Landing on a nearby tree branch, the owl flips the mouse into its mouth.

The owl bobs its head up and down as it swallows the meal whole, headfirst. Then it returns to its high perch to start hunting again.



A Gallery of North American Owls

North America is home to 19 kinds of owls. Here are a few of the ones you might see or hear where you live.



Northern Saw-whet Owl

Length: 7"
This tiny owl gets its name from one of the sounds it makes. Early settlers to the U.S. thought it sounded like a saw being sharpened on a whetstone.

Eastern Screech-Owl

Length: 7" to 10"
This owl doesn't screech at all, but makes a trembling, whistling sound and a soft trill. It sometimes catches insects in mid-air.

Burrowing Owl

Length: 9"
This long-legged little owl nests in underground burrows. When frightened, it mimics the hissing sound of a rattlesnake—a very effective way to scare predators away.

Barred Owl

Length: 17" to 24"
The pattern of dark and light feathers on this owl's neck, breast, and belly give it its name. People say this "hoot owl" sounds like it's calling, "Who cooks for you?"

Great Horned Owl

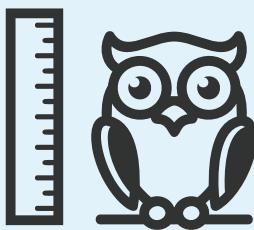
Length: 18" to 25"
This powerful hunter gets its name from the tufts of feathers on its head, which aren't horns at all. They help this big owl look even larger and also help it blend in with its surroundings.

Can You See Me Now?

Snowy Owls are white and so they blend in with the snow that covers their habitat most of the year. The Burrowing Owl is brown to match the ground.



TRY THIS!



This Owl Is As Big As...

Choose one of the owls above. Using a yardstick, find objects in your classroom that are about the same size. Can you believe the difference between a Northern Saw-whet Owl and a Great Horned Owl?

A Look Inside an Owl Pellet

Once an owl catches its prey, it either swallows the animal whole or uses its sharp hooked beak to rip it apart. The animal's flesh is digested in the owl's stomach, but it can't digest the fur and bones. These leftovers are squeezed into a neat little package called a pellet that the owl coughs up. Owl pellets look like round or oval balls of fur, with white bones sticking out. You can find them under an owl's roosting spot or nest.

The "Flying Mousetrap"

Different owls eat different things—snakes, skunks (owls, like most birds, have a poor sense of smell), opossums, insects, lizards, even other birds—but most species prefer small rodents such as mice and voles. If owls weren't such efficient "mousetraps," the numbers of mice and other rodents would soar. That would be a big problem for farmers, because rodents are a major cause of crop damage and loss.



Can Owls Really Do That?

It's a common belief that owls can turn their heads all the way around. Not true! Owls have extra small bones in their necks that make it possible for them to turn their heads about three-fourths of the way around, but not all the way. There's a good reason for this. Owls have very big eyes, but they can't move their eyes within their heads the way other animals and people can. So in order to see what's not right in front of it, an owl has to turn its head.

Owl Fact or Fiction?

There is a lot of misinformation about owls. Can you tell owl facts from owl fiction based on what you've read in this magazine? Check the "True" or "False" column for each statement below. Then turn the page upside-down to check your answers.

1. Screech-owls screech.
 TRUE **FALSE**
2. Burrowing Owls nest in burrows.
 TRUE **FALSE**
3. Great Horned Owls have horns.
 TRUE **FALSE**
4. Owls have special feathers that help them fly silently.
 TRUE **FALSE**
5. Many owls eat mice.
 TRUE **FALSE**
6. Some owls eat skunks.
 TRUE **FALSE**

PEOPLE HELPING WILDLIFE



Many owls, like this Boreal Owl, are cavity-nesters, which means they lay their eggs in holes in trees. Since it can be hard to find a good spot for a nest, people often build nest boxes for owls to use.

Watch Owls Live!

You can see owls in their natural habitat with web cams on the Internet. A great place to find owl cams is the YouTube channel of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Start here:

www.youtube.com/user/LabofOrnithology

In the "search" box at the top of the page, type in "owl cam." You'll be able to check in on owls in different parts of the country.



TRY THIS!

Your Own Owl Tale

While you are watching an owl cam, write down your observations. What do the owls look like? What are they doing? What does the nest look like? Are there any owlets (baby owls)? Now write a short story about owls. In your story, use your observations to describe the owls, their nest, their food, the sounds they make, and their activities for a person who has never seen an owl up close.

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