



Audubon ADVENTURES®

National Audubon Society

Owl Prowl



Have you ever been on an owl prowl? That's a hike in the woods at night to listen for the hoots and wails and shrieks of owls. An owl prowl is just one way to learn about these cool birds. Some folks listen to CDs or tapes of owl sounds, while others see owls at zoos. Any way you do it, learning about owls is an exciting adventure.

An owl's entire body is really one super-duper mousetrap. Its eyes are large so that a lot of light can enter, especially at dusk and at night when the owl is likely to be hunting. And its saucer-shaped face acts like a big funnel to catch sounds and direct them to its ears, which are hidden under thick feathers. Those ears don't exactly line up the way ears do on most animals (including humans). Instead, one is higher than the other, which helps the owl focus in on where a sound, like the squeaking of a mouse, is coming from.

This flying mousetrap also has special feathers on the leading edge of each wing. These feathers have a soft, velvety fringe that deadens the sounds of its flapping wings so the owl can fly without making any noise. Even the owl's feet help make it a better predator. The feet are equipped with very sharp talons, or claws, that allow the bird to grab and kill its prey.

Once an owl catches its prey, it either swallows the animal whole or uses its sharp hooked beak to rip it apart. Powerful digestive juices in the owl's

stomach digest the prey's flesh, but the stomach can't digest the fur and bones. These leftovers are squeezed into a neat little package called a pellet that the owl coughs up.

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.

If you carefully pull one apart you may find the skull, ribs, and other bones of an entire mouse or vole. Biologists and other scientists use owl pellets to gather information about owl populations as well as their prey.

Owls are found all over the world. There are about 130 different kinds of owls, and 19 kinds live in North America. Owls hunt on the frozen tundra of the Arctic and in the deep forests of the tropics. You may see one along the side of a highway or hear it as it perches in a tree in a city park. One particular owl, the great horned owl, is found in just about every state in the United States. Snowy owls are white so that they blend in with the snow that covers their habi-

tat a good part of the year. Other owls, like the burrowing owl, are brownish to match the ground.

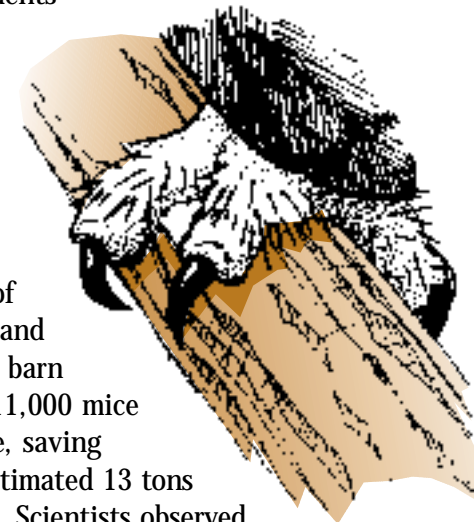
The giant of the owl family here in North America is the great gray owl, which stands more than two feet high. The shrimp of the family is called the elf owl—it's only about five inches tall. There are owls with round faces and even one—the barn owl—with a heart-shaped face.

Regardless of their size, all owls are excellent predators. Some may dine mostly on insects, while others kill birds, frogs, snakes, rodents, and other mammals. The great horned owl has even been known to catch house cats and skunks!

A Farmer's Friend

If owls weren't around to provide round-the-clock pest control, 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. A single barn owl can kill 11,000 mice during its life, saving farmers an estimated 13 tons in crop losses. Scientists observed two parent barn owls and their six chicks that ate 1,000 mice, shrews, and voles during a three-month period. So let's hear it for the owls! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!



The NIGHT HUNTER

A
is s
See
hunt



A faint noise in the dark

Where is it? The owl turns its head to concentrate on the sound. The round disks on its face open to move the sound toward the ears. The owl hears the sound a second time. Now it has pinpointed the location of the sound and starts to attack.



The owl springs from its high perch

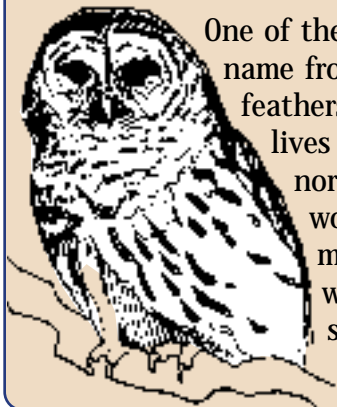
With special wing feathers muffling the sound, it flies silently toward the noise. Its eyes, specially adapted to see at night, detect the movement of a small animal on the ground.



Great Horned Owl

Length: 18" to 25"

Its name comes from the tufts of feathers on its head, but they are not horns at all. The great horned owl is a powerful hunter and is sometimes called the "tiger owl." It lives throughout the United States, often near golf courses, and feeds on rabbits, hawks, snakes, skunks, and beetles.



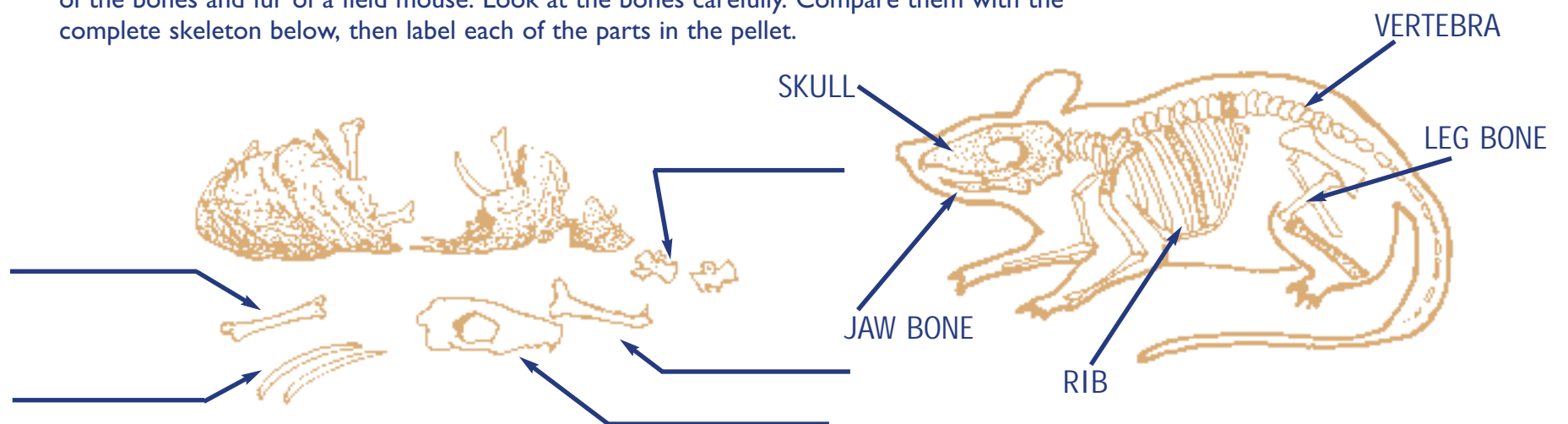
Barred Owl

Length: 17" to 24"

One of the "hoot owls," this large owl gets its name from the pattern of dark and light feathers on its neck, breast, and belly. It lives east of the Rocky Mountains, from north to south, and prefers thick woods and swampy areas. It feeds on mice and other small mammals, as well as birds, frogs, snakes, lizards, salamanders, some insects, and even crayfish, crabs, and fish.

A Close Look at an Owl Pellet

Here's your chance to be an owl scientist. This is a pellet found near a roost. It is made up of the bones and fur of a field mouse. Look at the bones carefully. Compare them with the complete skeleton below, then label each of the parts in the pellet.



n owl is a superb hunter. Each part of its body is specially equipped to help it hunt successfully. How does this equipment help the screech owl for a meal at night.

Saw-whet Owl

Length: 7"

This very small owl is usually silent, but the sound it does make is how it got its name. In breeding season, it makes a series of toots that can go on for hours. Early settlers to this country thought this sounded like a saw being sharpened on a whetstone (a special kind of stone used for sharpening metal edges). The saw-whet owl prefers evergreen forests, feeds mostly on mice, and nests in tree cavities.



Burrowing Owl

Length: 9"

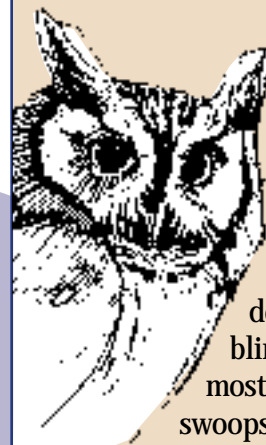
This long-legged, pint-size owl lives in deserts, plains, fields, and even airports in the western states and in Florida. It got its name from the fact that it builds its nest in an underground burrow. In the West it usually uses an abandoned prairie dog or pocket gopher hole, but in Florida it usually digs its own hole. When frightened, a burrowing owl makes a snakelike hissing sound to scare away predators, and even people. Its diet depends on where it lives, but can include insects and small mammals, as well as birds, frogs, lizards, and snakes.



Screech Owl

Length: 7" to 10"

This owl is a common neighbor to humans, but is rarely seen, because it roosts out of sight in the daytime and becomes active at night. You can invite one to your neighborhood by putting up a nest box designed just for this owl. The screech owl does not screech at all, but makes a trembling, whistling sound and a soft trill. It feeds mostly on small rodents and large insects. It swoops down to catch prey on the ground, but also catches insects in the air.



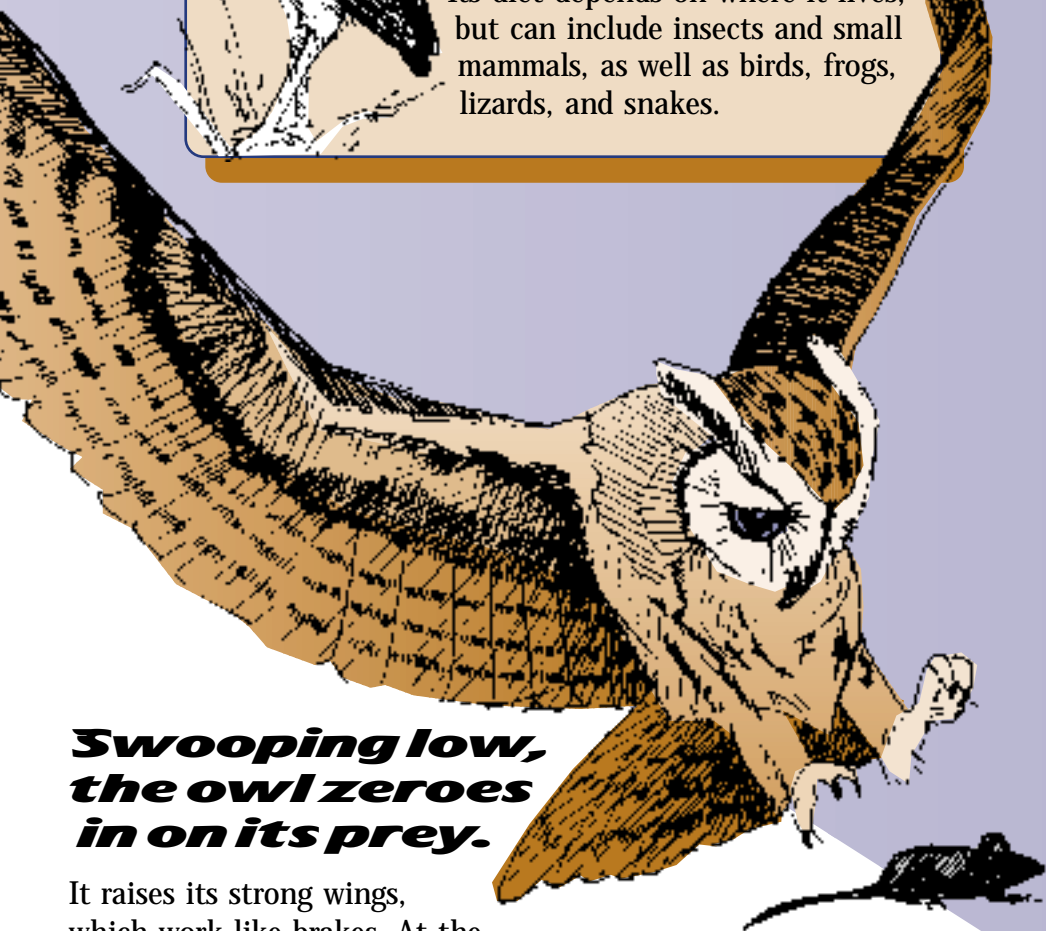
Landing on a nearby tree branch, the owl flips the mouse into its mouth.

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



Swooping low, the owl zeroes in on its prey.

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



Are You Owl Wise?

There is a lot of misinformation about owls. Even their names are sometimes based on incorrect information. Can you tell owl facts from owl fiction?

FACT	FICTION
<input type="checkbox"/>	Screech owls screech.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Burrowing owls burrow.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Great horned owls have horns.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Owls have special feathers to help them fly silently.
<input type="checkbox"/>	The shape of an owl's face helps it hear better.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Many kinds of owls eat mice.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Some owls eat fish.

Critters of the Night

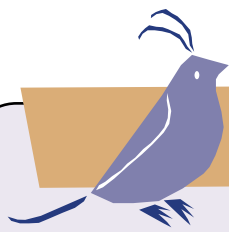
All the animals hiding in this word puzzle are fully or partly nocturnal, just as owls are. How many can you find? The clues (below) and these tips will help you:

- The words go up, down, sideways, diagonally, forward, and backward.
- Every letter in the puzzle is used at least once.

D R A P O E L
 B A T H R S B
 I A A Y A U F
 T R R E C O I
 T D E N C M R
 E V R A O F E
 R A A T O W F
 N R H X N Y L
 S K U N K S Y

Word Clues

- Flying mouse hunter:
B _ _ _ O _ _
- F _ _ tree (evergreen);
home for this "bandit" mammal:
R _ _ C _ _ _
- Male cat: T _ _
- Jackal home: D _ _ _
- Night-flying migratory birds:
American B _ T T _ _ N S
- Lion baby: C _ _
- Nighttime scavenger:
Laughing H _ _ _ A
- Panther: type of L _ _ P _ _ D
- Stinky mammals: Striped S _ _ _ _ S
- Type of bobcat: Bay L _ _ X
- Tiny rodent: Harvest M _ _ S _
- Bird attraction: Bird B _ _ _
- Long-tailed, city-dwelling rodent:
Brown R _ _ _
- "Sly" member of the dog family:
Red F _ _
- Delicate, flying beauty:
Luna M _ _ _
- Rabbit cousin: Spring H _ _ _ _
- Blood drinker: Vampire B _ _ _
- African termite eater:
A A _ _ _ _ K
- Lightning bug: F _ _ _ _ _ Y



FIELD NOTES



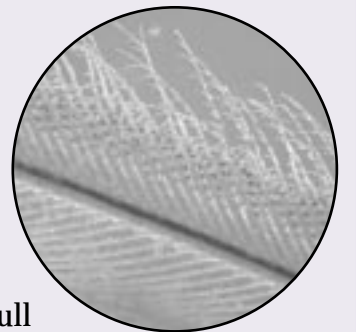
Feather Facts

Birds are the only creatures with feathers. "Light as a feather" is no exaggeration. Feathers weigh very little, but birds could not live without them. Feathers allow flight, provide terrific insulation, and keep rain and snow away from the skin. They can be as colorful as a rainbow or make a bird blend in perfectly with its surroundings.

All the feathers on a bird's body are called its plumage. A tiny ruby-throated hummingbird has about 1,000 feathers; a white-throated sparrow has about 2,000. A scientist once counted every feather on a tundra swan ... and came up with 25,216. Every feather on a bird's body is controlled by a set of tiny muscles, which allows the bird to raise or lower them—fluffing its feathers on a cold day, for example.

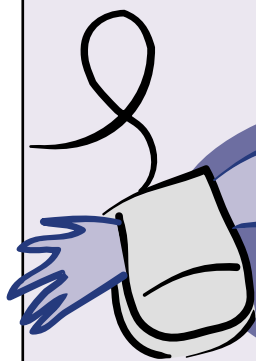
A Feather Close-up

The shaft is the long stiff quill that runs up the middle of every feather. The vanes on both sides of the shaft are made up of thousands of tiny strands called barbs. You need a microscope to see that each barb in a feather's vanes is covered with tiny hooks that grip each other like miniature zippers. You can pull the barbs apart, then stroke them back together again with your fingertips. A bird does this with its beak when it preens.



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ON-LINE ADVENTURES



Owls of the World
www.owlpages.com/world_owls.html
 Owl calls, colorful pictures, and interesting facts galore!

Owl Cam
<http://members.aol.com/owlbox/owlhome.htm>
 An owl-friendly camera hidden in a nest box lets you view a pair of Northern Barred Owls as they raise their family in Eastern Massachusetts!

Answer to clues: 1. Barn owl; 2. Fir, Raccoon; 3. Tom; 4. Den; 5. Bitterns; 6. Cub; 7. Hyena; 8. Leopard; 9. Skunks; 10. Lynx; 11. Mouse; 12. Bath; 13. Rat; 14. Fox; 15. Moth; 16. Hare; 17. Bat; 18. Aardvark; 19. Firefly.



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