

For Creative Minds

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Owl Pellets

When an owl eats a mouse or other prey, there are parts (nails, teeth, bones, skulls, fur, feathers) that are hard to digest. These parts are packed together into a pellet inside the owl. An owl coughs up about two pellets a day, roughly six to twelve hours after it eats. Because an owl usually swallows its prey whole, a pellet often contains the prey's whole skeleton. The bones and teeth are wrapped in fur. This fur protects the owl's throat when the owl coughs up the pellet.

Many birds cough up pellets, not just owls. Usually, the larger the bird, the larger the pellet. Barred owls weigh 1.6 pounds. Barred owl pellets are about two inches long. Snowy owls weigh 4 pounds. Snowy owl pellets are about five inches long.



If you find where an owl has roosted, you may discover one or more pellets on the ground beneath the roost. If you take a pellet apart, you can often tell exactly what kind of prey the owl ate from the bones and skulls that are in it.



barred owl pellet
(dissected)

barred owl pellet

Which of These Does an Owl Eat?

Which of these animals do you think owls can eat? Answers are below.



eastern chipmunk



green frog



meadow vole



ruffed grouse



common garter snake



red squirrel



striped skunk



woodchuck

Answer: All of them

Owl Anatomy

Owls, eagles, hawks, falcons, and ospreys are raptors, or birds of prey. Raptors feed on other animals (prey), including mice, voles, rabbits, opossums, frogs, snakes and even skunks. Most raptors have excellent eyesight, strong beaks, and sharp talons (claws). These help them hunt, catch, kill, and eat their prey.

Match the photo to the description of the body part on the next page.



northern hawk owl



great horned owl



barred owl



barn owl



snowy owl



great gray owl



barred owl

Eyes. Most owls are active at night. Their eyes are large in order to collect light so that they can see where to fly and find prey to eat. The eyes of most birds are on the sides of their face, but owl eyes are in the front. This helps owls tell how far away a mouse or squirrel is. Owls cannot move their eyes to the left or right; they can only see straight ahead. In order to see to either side, owls must turn their entire head. Because owls have 14 neck bones (twice as many as humans), they can turn their head three-quarters of the way around in either direction in order to see behind them.

Owls can see well at night, but they can also see in the day.

Facial Disc. Each owl eye is located in the middle of a round circle of feathers called a facial disc. These special feathers collect sound and help owls hear soft noises by directing sound waves to their ears. Owls that hunt only at night tend to have large facial discs, as they have to listen for prey in the dark.

Have a friend say something softly to you from across the room. Then cup your hands behind your ears and have your friend repeat what he or she said. Can you hear better with or without your "discs" or hands?

Talons. The claws on an owl's toes are called talons. They are long, curved, and very sharp. Birds of prey use their feet and talons to catch and kill their prey. Bigger owls usually have bigger talons and can catch larger prey.

Three toes on each foot point forward and one toe points backwards. If their prey is struggling, owls can rotate one of their front toes to the back, in order to get a better grip on their prey.

Beak. An owl's beak is short and curved downward. It helps them hold prey and tear it for their young. If it stuck straight out, an owl's beak might make it hard for the owl to see. Owls normally eat their prey whole, but if their prey is too big to swallow, they use their beak to tear it into small pieces.

Feathers. Owls fly and glide silently. Their feathers are velvety thick and soft, absorbing a lot of the sound of their flight. Unlike other raptors, they also have a comb-like fringe on the outer edge of their first few wing feathers that muffles sound and helps them fly quietly. Owls can hear their prey, but their prey has a hard time hearing them.

Why would an owl not want to make any sound when it is flying?

Ears. An owl's ears are on the sides of its head, not the top. The feathers that stick up on some owls are tufts of feathers, not ears. It is hard to see an owl's ears, as they are usually covered with facial disc feathers. Owl ears are simply holes in the sides of the owl's head. If an owl's ears stuck out from its head like a human's ears do, they would not be able to fly as well as they do.