

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Silent, Nighttime Hunters

By Guy Belleranti

Owls are raptors, or birds of prey. They are carnivores who quickly and silently swoop down on their prey from above. Most raptors such as eagles, hawks and falcons are day hunters. They use their sharp eyesight to spot small animals on the ground below. Owls, on the other hand, use their senses to hunt in a different way. Owls are nocturnal, which means they do their hunting at night.

## What do owls eat?

Prey usually includes small mammals, such as rodents, rabbits, mice, moles, and voles. They will also eat small lizards, frogs, insects, and even other birds.

A couple varieties, such as the Asian Fishing Owl, will even wait on the banks of rivers and creeks so they can swoop down to catch fish.



Photo A: The Common Great-Horned Owl lives in North America.

## Why do owls hunt at night?

An owl hunts after dark, when there's less competition from other predators. During the nighttime it's easier for an owl to fly around unseen.

Owls have special adaptations that allow them to hunt in darkness, when most other birds and large predators are asleep.

## How does an owl capture and eat its prey?

Like all raptors, an owl has powerful talons on its feet and a sharp beak on its head. It uses its sharp talons to capture and hold small animals. Owls can swallow smaller prey whole. It uses its beak to tear larger prey into pieces before swallowing.

Because owls swallow prey whole or in large chunks, they regurgitate (spit up) undigested bone, fur, and feathers in the form of pellets.

## How do any owl's keen senses help it to hunt at night?

The feathers around an owl's circular inset face catch and direct sound to its ears. In fact, an owl can hear a mouse 75 feet away! Its soft feathers have a special shape that allow it to fly silently, so its prey can't hear it coming. Even the owl doesn't hear its own wings, making it easier to concentrate on hearing prey.

The owl's huge forward-facing eyes have the unique ability to see in low light. Its thin beak is low on the face and points downward, so it doesn't block the owl's view while catching prey.

Unlike a human, an owl can't move its eyes to look to the sides, but it can move its head  $\frac{3}{4}$ 's of the way around. This means an owl can see behind itself just by turning its head! How would you like to be able to do that?



Photo B: Notice the camouflage on this Tawny Owl.

## Where do owls live?

Owls are found in deserts, grasslands, and forests all over the world. They are on every continent except Antarctica.

While most owls live in trees, some varieties of owls live in caves, mines, old buildings, and barns. Burrowing owls live in underground burrows.

## Do owls have camouflage to help protect them from predators?

Yes, most owls have special coloring and patterns on their bodies to help them blend into their natural surroundings. Owls that live in trees often mimic the pattern of tree bark. (See photo B.)

Snowy Owls live in the treeless tundra of the arctic. Their white coloring provides camouflage in these icy surroundings.

## How big are owls?

The Eurasian Eagle Owl, which lives across most of Europe and Asia, is one of the largest owl species. It has a six foot wingspan and can weigh nine pounds.

The Elf Owl, which lives in the deserts of Arizona and Mexico, is the world's smallest owl species. Its wingspan is usually under a foot. At only 1.9 ounces, it weighs less than a hot dog.

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## Reading Comprehension Questions



1. Which sentence best describes how an owl eats its prey?
  - a. It rips the prey into tiny bits before eating.
  - b. It eats large chunks of its prey, or swallows the animal whole.
  - c. It hides its food behind its wing when it eats.
  - d. It drinks water while it eats.

2. An owl's beak is thin and low on its face. How does this adaptation help owls survive?

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3. According to the information in the article, what can a human do with his or her eyes that an owl can't?

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4. On which continent do Common Great-Horned Owls live?

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5. Do Snowy Owls live in the Northern or Southern Hemisphere?

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6. Does the Eurasian Eagle Owl live in the Eastern or Western Hemisphere?

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7. What is an owl pellet?

- a. the part of an owl's body that it uses to make a hooting sound
- b. the part of an owl's body that it uses to smell its prey
- c. the part of an owl's prey that it does not swallow
- d. the part of an owl's prey that is spit up because it could not be digested

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## Vocabulary Activity



The scrambled words below are vocabulary words from the article. Unscramble each word and write it on the line. Please be sure each word is spelled correctly.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

p o s o w

**hint:** move rapidly down through the air

2. \_\_\_\_\_

n e r p t a t

**hint:** repeated design

3. \_\_\_\_\_

s r o p e a t r d

**hint:** hunters

4. \_\_\_\_\_

w r o r b u s

**hint:** underground animal homes

5. \_\_\_\_\_

m i c m i

**hint:** copy

6. \_\_\_\_\_

t l o s a n

**hint:** bird's claws

7. \_\_\_\_\_

c e t i n n o t n

**hint:** large mass of land



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# Owl Camouflage Pictures Internet Project

## Research Activity

In the article, "Silent, Nighttime Hunters," you learned that owls use camouflage to blend into its surroundings.

With the help of an adult, use the Internet to search for photos of camouflaged owls.



Print your pictures or save them in a PowerPoint slide show. Then share the pictures with your class. You may want to challenge your classmates to a game of "Who can spot the owl first?"

List the websites where you found your pictures in the space below.

| Website Name | URL or Domain |
|--------------|---------------|
|              |               |
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# ANSWER KEY

## Silent, Nighttime Hunters

### Reading Comprehension Questions



- Which sentence best describes how an owl eats its prey? **b**
  - It rips the prey into tiny bits before eating.
  - It eats large chunks of its prey, or swallows the animal whole.**
  - It hides its food behind its wing when it eats.
  - It drinks water while it eats.
- An owl's beak is thin and low on its face. How does this adaptation help owls survive?  
**The size and location of its beak allow it to hunt without the beak getting in the way of its vision.**
- What can a human do with his or her eyes that an owl can't?  
**An owl can't move its eyes from side to side.**
- On which continent do Common Great-Horned Owls live? **North America**
- Do Snowy Owls live in the Northern or Southern Hemisphere? **Northern Hemisphere**
- Does the Eurasian Eagle Owl live in the Eastern or Western Hemisphere? **Eastern Hemisphere**
- What is an owl pellet? **d**
  - the part of an owl's body that it uses to make a hooting sound
  - the part of an owl's body that it uses to smell its prey
  - the part of an owl's prey that it does not swallow
  - the part of an owl's prey that is spit up because it could not be digested**

