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Owls Overhead



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Written by Karen Mockler

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Boreal owlets

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Flying in the Moonlight

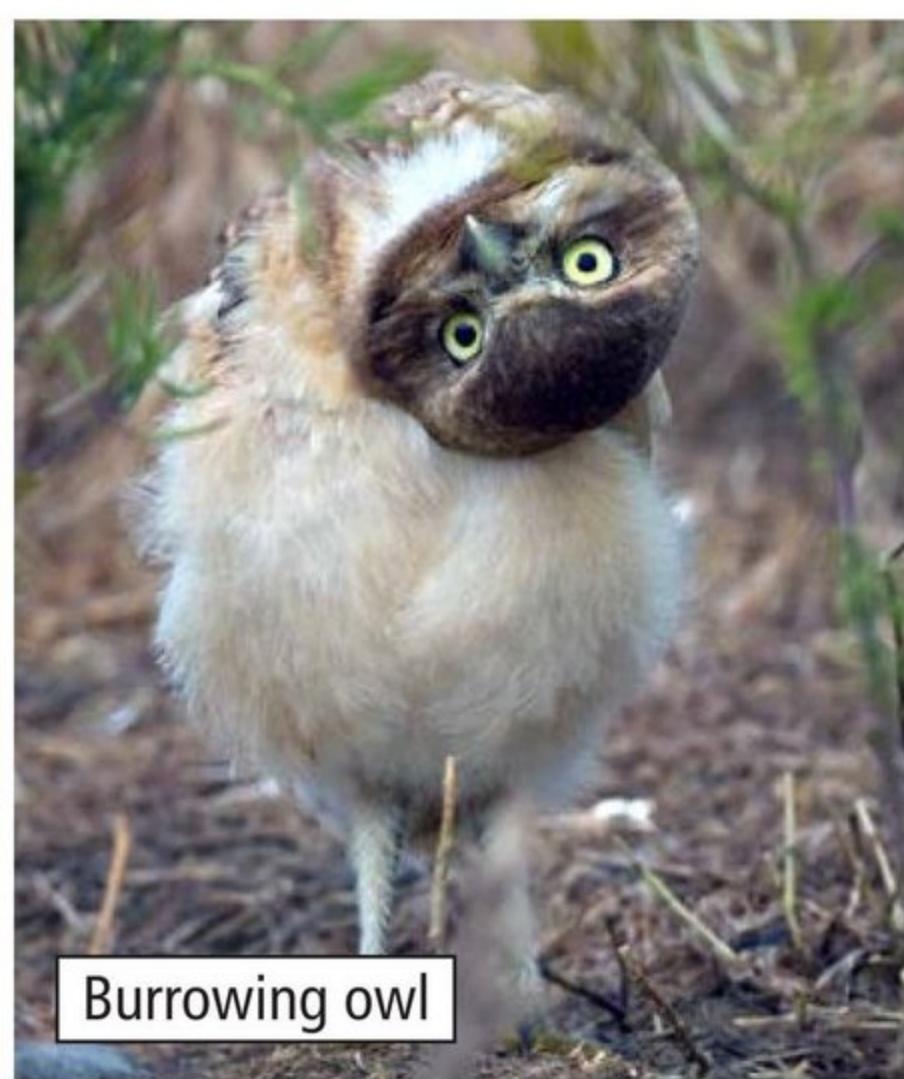
It's a quiet, moonlit night, and you walk along a dirt path on the edge of town. Suddenly, a shadow crosses your path, but you hear no sound. You look up as a dark shape glides over you and disappears into the nearby trees.

It's an owl—one of more than two hundred different **species** of owls that live around the world. They come in many sizes and live on every continent except Antarctica.

Eyes for the Night

Many of the **adaptations** that help owls **survive** also make them seem **mysterious**. For instance, most owls hunt at night. As a result, they don't have to compete with daytime hunters such as eagles, hawks, and falcons.

Like most birds, owls can't move their eyes in their sockets. Instead, owls must turn their heads to track a moving object. Owls are able to **rotate** their heads almost all the way around—280 degrees. They can even turn their heads upside down.





An owl's pupils are small in bright light (top) and large in low light (bottom).

Owls' big eyes are an adaptation, too. These birds can't see in total darkness. However, their pupils—the black circles in the center of their eyes—can grow large to let in more light. Their large pupils let them see better in low light than most animals. In fact, when light is low, tawny owls see as much as one hundred times better than humans.



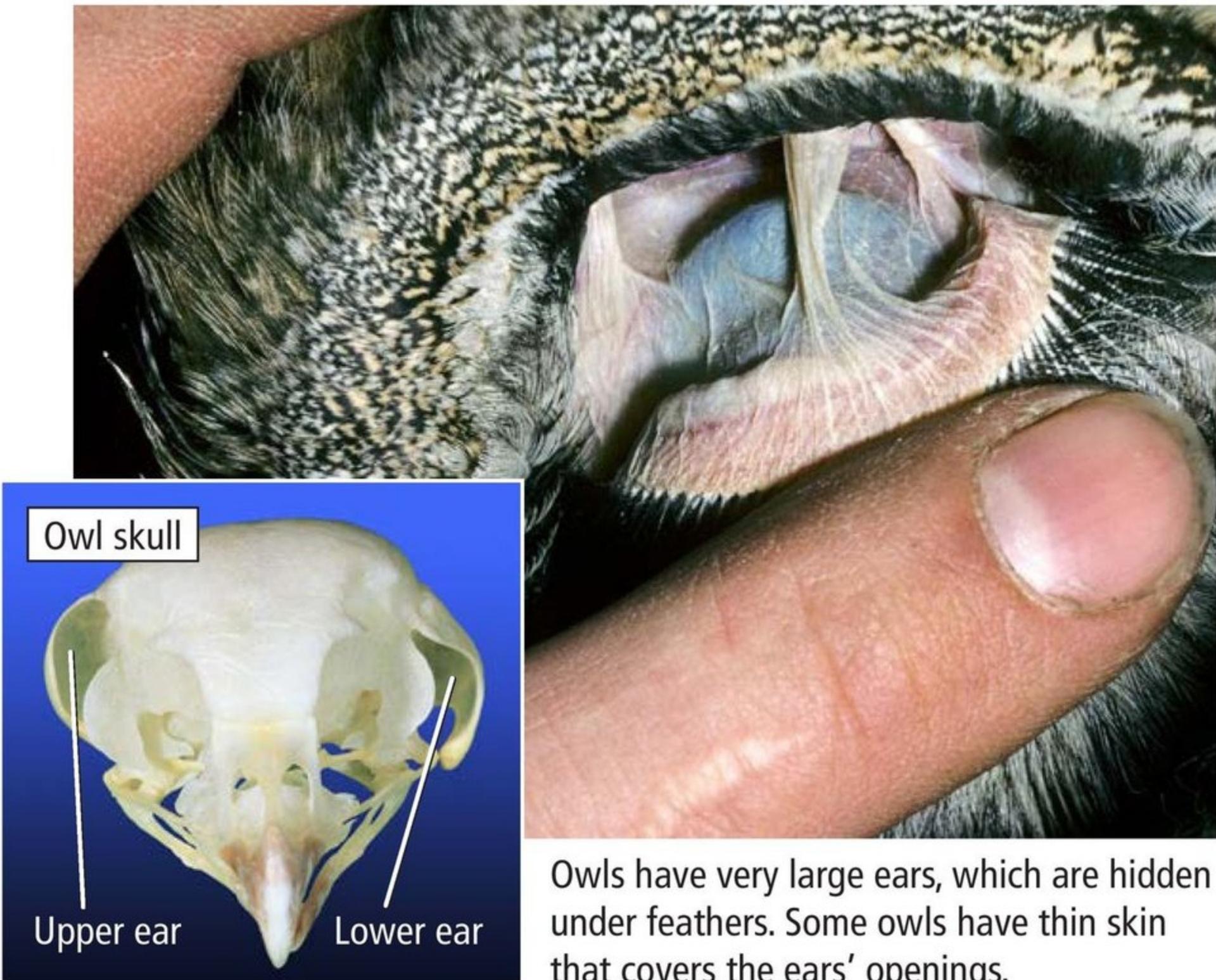
The hairlike feathers on owls' faces help them react to things they touch. Some owls even have these feathers on their feet!

As good as their night vision is, owls can't see things close to their faces. Instead, hairlike feathers work like feelers to help owls react to things they touch, sort of like a cat's whiskers.

Pellets!

Owls can't chew or grind their food. Instead, they often swallow small prey whole. They can't digest the unwanted parts of the animals. Teeth, claws, and small bones, stuck together with bits of fur or feathers, end up in the gizzard. That's a part of their stomach with strong muscles that roll those parts into small balls, called *pellets*. A few hours after they eat, owls cough up a pellet. Scientists look through the pellets to learn what owls eat.





Owls have very large ears, which are hidden under feathers. Some owls have thin skin that covers the ears' openings.

Even Better Ears

To hunt, however, most owls rely on their hearing. Most owls have huge ears, with one higher than the other. The higher one hears sounds from above, while the lower one hears sounds from below. Their flat, round faces help funnel sounds to their ears. By moving the feathers around their faces, owls can send more sound to one ear or the other. Doing this helps them locate prey.



Owls, such as this barn owl, often crush their prey with their strong feet and sharp talons. The grip of some owls can be ten times stronger than a human's grip.

Their hearing is so good that they can hear bugs in grass or mice in snow. In fact, owls have better hearing than any other group of birds.

Great gray owls can hear a mouse hidden under 18 inches (46 cm) of snow. Once they've located their prey, they can dive under the snow to grab a meal.

Barn owls can hear a mouse moving 90 feet (27 m) away and catch one in complete darkness. They have the best hearing of any animal ever tested.

Silent Hunters

Many animals that owls hunt also have excellent hearing. So if an owl wants to eat, it must **attack** by surprise. The soft feathers that cover owls' bodies allow them to fly silently.



Great horned owls are excellent hunters. They can even catch another bird in flight.

A great horned owl will sit high on a tree branch, watching until the time is right to attack. A skillful hunter, it feeds on many kinds of animals, even skunks and snakes. In Florida, one great horned owl tackled a 6-foot

(2 m) indigo snake and won. It also eats birds, including eight other owl species. In fact, many large owls eat small owls.



Elf owl



Snowy owl

While most owls hunt only at night, snowy owls hunt mostly during the day. That's because summer nights in the Arctic are so short. The tiny elf owl hunts during the day as well, feeding mostly on insects.

The main diet for most owls, though, is small mammals—lots of them. A hungry great gray owl may eat 1,400 voles in a year. In its lifetime, a barn owl may eat 11,000 mice!



A barn owl lives up to its name by raising its young in a barn.

Where Owls Live

Some owls can live in many different **habitats**. The great horned owl lives in swamps, forests, prairies, mountains, and deserts. Barn owls live under bridges as well as in caves, empty houses, church towers—and barns, of course!



Burrowing owls can scare away other animals by making a sound like a rattlesnake's.



An Owl's Housekeeper

Screech owls in Texas hunt snakes. However, they bring one kind of snake back to their nest alive: the blindsnake. They let it go inside the nest, where it eats the maggots that feed on the dead animals stored there. The snake becomes a housekeeper!

Some owls require a special habitat, though. Burrowing owls live mostly on the prairie and nest underground, using old burrows dug by mammals. When open spaces are hard to find, they move to cemeteries and golf courses, and even near airport runways.



Spotted owls do not fly south for the winter.

Spotted owls can only survive in **old-growth** forests. By 1994, 80 percent of their former habitat had been destroyed by logging. To protect the spotted owl, loggers cut down fewer trees, but barred owls have since taken over spotted owl habitat. Today, they outnumber spotted owls in the northwestern United States.

Owl Sounds

Owls aren't always silent, nor do they all hoot. They use different sounds to call a mate, warn of danger, or claim an area. Each species has its own calls that set it apart from other owls. A great horned owl can bark like a dog and meow like a cat. Barn owls don't hoot—they scream. Their strange cry and ghostly appearance once made some people think of barn owls as bad luck.



Photographers take pictures of a great gray owl, the largest species of owl in the world.

Owls Are Out There

It's rare to see an owl, but they're out there. If you're in the country and want to spot one, try going out at dawn or dusk. Listen for their calls.

If you stay out late enough, people might think you're an owl—a night owl, that is.

Glossary

adaptations (<i>n.</i>)	changes that allow an animal to survive better in its environment (p. 5)
attack (<i>v.</i>)	to act harmfully toward (p. 10)
habitats (<i>n.</i>)	the natural environment of a plant or animal (p. 12)
mysterious (<i>adj.</i>)	odd; not easy to understand (p. 5)
old-growth (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to very old forests (p. 14)
prey (<i>n.</i>)	an animal that is hunted and eaten by another animal (p. 8)
rotate (<i>v.</i>)	to turn on a center; to revolve (p. 5)
species (<i>n.</i>)	a group of living things that are similar and can produce young (p. 4)
survive (<i>v.</i>)	to stay alive (p. 5)

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Front cover: Barn owl

Back cover: Little owl

Title page: Tawny owl

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