



## Owls



The Great Horned Owl is among our most common and well recognized owls.

**L**ike most wildlife in their natural habitats, owls are not likely to be seen often. Nocturnal and often solitary, they are usually shy of humans and avoid them when possible. Specialized wing feathers allow them to fly silently, enabling them to catch prey easier and avoid detection.

### Owl Natural History

#### Overview

With strong eyesight (100 times more effective in dim light than humans), owls are specifically adapted to hunting at night or in low levels of light. Their eyes are immovably fixed in the front of the head and, as a result, they must move their heads in a 270 degree arc to see from side to side. (It is not true that owls can turn their heads completely around!) Owls can hear sounds 10 times fainter than a human can. Their soft, silent feathers enable them to swoop down undetected onto prey. They have a reversed outer toe, which helps to grasp prey.

#### Habitat

Owls live in a variety of habitats, including coniferous forests, mountains, deserts, and plains. The snowy owl lives in the cold tundra of the north.

#### Nesting Habits

Owls nest in a variety of ways. Several species, such as great gray and great horned owls, live in old hawk or squirrel nests. Others, including the snowy owl and short-eared owl, nest on the ground. The burrowing owl lives in old mammal burrows. Many owls nest in tree cavities.

#### Diet

An owl's diet consists of rabbits, rodents, reptiles, insects, and even other birds. Large owls have been documented to eat skunks, opossums, and large ducks. While some believe that owls injure poultry, this is really not common, and the benefits of keeping a rodent population in check are great.

### Conservation

Lacking natural predators, the only real dangers owls face are the influences of human activity. Even though owls are protected throughout the United States, many species are declining due to habitat loss and illegal shooting.

## Daytime Owls

Barred Owls can sometimes be heard hooting on summer days.

By providing wild areas such as fields and forests where owls can find food and shelter, you can help them to survive. Nest boxes can also be installed on your property to provide them with additional nesting and roosting locations.

## Owl Nest Boxes

There are five species of cavity nesting owls which may be enticed to use nest boxes. These are the barred owl, Eastern and Western screech owls, Northern saw-whet owl, and the barn owl. Due to the fact that these owls feed largely on what are considered pest species, they can be very beneficial to attract to your property.

The enjoyment of a family of owls is a lengthy experience because owls begin nesting by February in northern states and as early as late December in the south. The owlets are slow to develop, and the two or three owlets that hatch are usually in the nest for up to six weeks. They may be as old as nine or ten weeks before they are ready to fly and leave the site.

Screech owl boxes can be placed in or at the edge of woodlands or in settings such as parks or golf courses. Saw-whet owls prefer deep woods near swamps. Boxes for these species should be placed 5 to 20 feet up on a tree, post, or building. Since these owls may eat small birds, you may not want to place them near other bird boxes.

Barn owls prefer open farmland, where a nest box should be placed 10- 20 feet up on a tree, barn, or shed. Finally, barred owl boxes should be placed in woods or swamps in suburban or rural areas, 10-20 feet up on a tree.

## Evidence of Owls in Your Area

Owls eat their prey whole; flesh, feathers, hair, and bone are all ingested. The flesh is digested, and the remaining body parts and hair are formed into pellets in the owl's body and regurgitated. These pellets may be found at the base of trees. Finding these is good evidence of owls in your area. Also, gently pulling apart these pellets will give evidence of the smaller mammals and insects that are present.

Another way to determine if owls are using your property is to use a tape recording of owl calls for owls most likely to found in your area. This is sometimes called an owl prowling. Play these tapes in early spring, summer, or fall on a calm night. Owls usually call to communicate with other owls and will often respond to taped calls.

Owl Nest Boxes					
Species	Box Height	Inside Dimensions	Entrance hole	Entrance hole location	Box Placement
Barn owl	16 inches	16 x 22 inches	6-8 inches	4 inches above floor of box	Open farmland, 10-20 feet up on a tree, barn, or shed
Barred owl	22-28 inches	14 x 14 inches	6-8 inches	14-18 inches above floor of box	In woods or swamps, 10-20 feet up on a tree
Saw-whet and Screech owls	16 inches (see plans on next page)	7.75 x 9.25 inches	3 inches	11.5 inches above floor of box	Saw-whet- Deep woods near swamps, 5-20 feet up on a tree, post, or building  Screech- Edge of woods or in parks, 5-20 feet up on a tree, post, or building



Eastern Screech Owl



Immature Great Horned Owl

#### Helpful Web Sites

The World Owl Trust  
[www.owls.org/](http://www.owls.org/)

The Owl Pages  
[www.owlpages.com/](http://www.owlpages.com/)

#### e-Source

Visit our online information center for fact sheets on a variety of environmental topics:

[www.auduboninternational.org/e-source](http://www.auduboninternational.org/e-source)

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# Northern Screech Owl NEST BOX

