



# Owls



Owls are beautiful birds of prey, with flattish faces, short hooked beaks and sharp talons. There are over 200 types of owl living all over the world.

Here in Ireland, there are three main species: The barn owl, the long-eared owl and the short-eared owl.

## Famous Owl in fiction

A snowy owl called Hedwig is one of the most famous owls in fiction. She is Harry Potter's owl, in the series of children's books by JK Rowling. The half-giant Hagrid



gives Harry the owl as a present in the very first book, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. Hedwig becomes Harry's loyal companion. Harry gets Hedwig to deliver important messages, and she saves the day on more than one occasion. In the films, Hedwig is actually played by a series of male owls!

## Animal detectives - hunting for owls in your neighbourhood

*If you find either of these clues in your local area, it's likely that an owl is close by...*

**Pellets:** Remember the fact about owl pellets? These are made up of the bits of food owls can't digest, like the fur, bones and beaks of their prey. If you find several of these rolled-up, oblong pellets in one spot, it's likely an owl is nesting nearby. If you break one of these pellets open, you might even be able to work

out which animal your local owl ate last!

**Droppings:** Owls often rest in the same places day after day, so keep an eye out for piles of white droppings under likely trees. If there's an owl roosting in a building, you might find poop marks down walls or beams instead.

**Feathers:** During the spring, many owls moult some of their old feathers and grow new ones. As well as adult feathers, you might also find the fluffy, downy feathers shed by baby owls as they grow up.

## Here are ten things you might not know about our feathered friends:

- 1 Owls are carnivorous predators - meat eaters who catch their food. For example, barn owls usually eat mice, shrews and voles; while tawny owls munch rodents, small birds, frogs, insects and even fish!
- 2 When out and about hunting, owls tend to rely mostly on their hearing. For example, barn owls are able to find their prey in total darkness, as they can hear it making the smallest of noises.
- 3 Human ears are (usually!) at the same height on each side of the head. However, owl ears are placed higher on one side of their heads than on the other. This makes their hearing even sharper, especially when flying.
- 4 Try rolling your eyes in their sockets - owls can't do this! If an owl wants to look in a different direction, it has to move its whole head. In fact, many owls can turn their heads 280 degrees - that's three-quarters of the way round.
- 5 Unlike many birds, owls don't have oily, waterproof feathers. If a barn owl's feathers get wet, they suck up the water a bit like a sponge. That's why many owls can't hunt if it's raining.
- 6 Owls are famous for being creatures of the night. In fact, some owls (like short-eared owls) hunt during the day. These are called 'diurnal' owls. Other types (including barn owls) usually hunt at dawn and dusk. These are 'crepuscular' owls. The ones that do hunt at night (like tawny owls) are known as 'nocturnal' owls.
- 7 Most birds have a crop - a place inside a bird's body where it temporarily store food. Owls don't have crops, but swallow their prey directly into their stomachs.
- 8 There are certain bits of food that owls cannot digest (things like beaks, fur and bones - yuck!). Owls regurgitate these bits and spit them out, all rolled up in a pellet.
- 9 Not all owls hoot. Tawny owls do make the famous 'twit-twoooo'... but barn owl hiss and shriek instead!
- 10 In books, owls are usually described as being very wise. In fact, experts think they are less intelligent than many other types of bird, like ravens, crows and rooks.

