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FREE RESOURCE: FACTS ABOUT OWLS

It's time to learn about owls! Use this fun fact sheet to find out all about these beautiful birds. Look out for words in **bold** text and find out what they mean using the 'glossary' section. Finally, put your new knowledge to the test by answering the quiz questions at the end.

Introduction

There are over 200 different species of owl, spread all over the world. The largest species of owl is the European Eagle Owl from north and west Europe, while the smallest is the Elf Owl from South America/Mexico. Owls are predators, which means that they catch and eat other animals, known as 'prey'. They have a number of amazing **adaptations** to help them hunt and survive in the wild.

There are six species of owl that are native to the United Kingdom. The most common is the Tawny Owl, which is the only owl that makes the 'twit-twoo' noise we all think of as a typical owl noise. Then there is the Little Owl, the Barn Owl, the Short-Eared Owl, the Long-Eared Owl, and the Snowy Owl, which is sometimes seen in Scotland when it **migrates** for the winter.

Hearing

Most owls typically come out at night. Animals that are active at night are known as **nocturnal**. Because most owls come out in the dark, they have adapted to use their hearing to find their prey, instead of their eyesight.

Some owls, like the Long-Eared Owl in this photograph, have 'ear tufts' on top of their heads. These are not actually their ears and have nothing to do with hearing! These tufts of feathers are thought to help with



camouflage as they help to break up the owl's profile and let them blend in with their **habitat**.

You cannot actually see an owl's ears because they are holes on either side of the owl's head, just behind their eyes, and hidden by their feathers. An owl's ears are also in slightly different places – one is in line with the eye on one side of the head, and the other is just underneath the eye on the other side. This means that sounds reach each ear at very slightly different times, and this tiny time difference allows an owl to pinpoint exactly where a sound is coming from.

An owl also has a **facial disc** which they use a lot like a satellite dish, to pick up sounds and hear them more clearly. This facial disc acts in the same way as the fleshy bit of our outer ear, but is much more sensitive.



The bigger an owl's facial disc is, the more sensitive its hearing is. The owl with the largest facial disc in the world is the Great Grey Owl, which has hearing so good that it can hear a lemming running around underneath 30cm of snow!

Eyesight

Although owls mostly use their hearing to hunt, they do have amazing eyesight. Owls cannot see in complete darkness, but they need a lot less light than we do to be able to see. A Barn Owl can see perfectly well just by the light of the moon and the stars!

Not all owls come out at night, although most do. You can usually tell what time of day an owl hunts by looking at the colour of its eyes. For example:



An owl with very dark coloured irises (the coloured part of the eye), is normally **nocturnal**.



An owl with yellow coloured irises is generally active during the day, which is called being **diurnal**.



An owl with orange irises is usually **crepuscular**, which means they are active at dusk or dawn.

An owl's eyes are absolutely massive, much bigger than ours. Their eyes take up around 80% of the owl's skull - if we had eyes that big it would be like having two small oranges for eyes! They are also a different shape to ours – our eyes are round, like a ball, so that we can roll them around in their sockets. Try moving your eyes up and down, side to side, without moving your head. An owl cannot do this! An owl's eyes are shaped like tubes, and go back into their skull a long way, so they cannot move their eyes at all. This is why they can move their heads so much – an owl can turn its neck up to 270 degrees in either direction.

This means there is something we can do that an owl cannot – we can go cross eyed, so that we can focus our eyes on things that are close to our face. Try it and see: hold your arm out in front of you with one finger pointing up. Focus your eyes on your finger and then slowly move your finger towards your face while keeping focussed on your finger. Your eyes will automatically move in towards your nose, making you cross-eyes and allowing you to stay focussed on your finger!



Because owls cannot move their eyes, it means that they cannot see things that are very close to their face. It is a little bit like looking at the world through a pair of binoculars; everything in the distance is very clear and very focussed, but anything close up will be blurry as the owl cannot refocus its eyes to see near to it. Instead, they use the long, thin, sensitive feathers around their

beaks to feel around for things that are close to them, a lot like a cat using its whiskers. They will especially do this when they have caught their prey in their feet so that they can eat it! You can clearly see the long, whiskery feathers around the beak of the Spectacled Owl in this photograph – it gets this name because the white marks around its eyes look like spectacles, which is an old word for glasses.

Silent Flight

Owls fly silently, unlike most other birds. If you have ever heard a pigeon take off, for example, you might have heard lots of loud flapping noises. This is not their wings banging together such as we might clap our hands to make a noise; it is just the sound of air moving around and over the bird's wing. Owl wings are very big and their feathers are very soft; this means that they do not disturb much air when they fly so they are silent. This helps them to sneak up on their prey, and it means that there is no noise from their flying that would stop them from hearing the sounds their prey is making – remember that an owl finds its prey using its hearing, so this is very important!

Feet & Claws

Owls have very strong feet and sharp claws that they use to catch hold of their prey. Once an owl has got hold of its prey, they will grip very tightly to stop their prey from escaping. Having strong feet also helps them to hold on to perches when they are not flying. In this photo of a Tawny Owl, you can just about see his feet and claws, as well as his hooked beak, discussed below.



Beak, Feeding & Owl Pellets

Owls have a hooked beak, similar to birds of prey, but they do not usually tear up their food unless they are feeding it to their babies. Instead, an owl will usually swallow its prey whole if it can. Once they have digested their meal, they will **regurgitate** a pellet. This pellet is made up of all the bones, fur, feathers and other bits of their prey that they cannot digest. Some people will collect owl pellets and take them apart to see what the owls have been eating. You can search online to find owl pellet dissection kits if this is something you would like to try!

Glossary

Adaptation	An 'adaptation' is a feature or process that an animal has to help it survive better in its environment. The process of adaptation takes place over many generations, which is also known as 'evolution'. When we talk about adaptation, we mean a 'feature' which helps the animal to survive.
Camouflage	This is the word given for the way in which an animal helps itself to hide in the wild – this is usually through skin, fur or feather markings that help it blend in. For example, many British owls are brown to help them hide against tree trunks, as the bark is also brown.
Crepuscular	This is the name given to animals that are active at dusk (just before it gets dark as the sun is setting) and at dawn (just before it gets properly light as the sun is coming up). It is not a word that many people know, so practice and try to remember it, and then test it on some adults to see how clever they are!
Diurnal	This is the word given to animals that are active during the daytime when the sun is up.
Facial Disc	This is the name given to the ring of feathers around the edge of an owl's face, like the heart-shape of a Barn Owl's face. Some owls have very obvious facial discs and others less so. It acts as a hearing amplifier – making sounds louder and clearer as the owl is hunting.
Habitat	This is the name given to the environment an animal lives in out in the wild. There are lots of different habitats, such as woodlands, marsh land, grassland, etc – why not do some further research and see how much you can find out about different habitats?
Migrates	'Migration' is when an animal travels from one place to another, sometimes even to different countries. This is usually to find food, find a mate, and/or find nicer weather during winter months!
Nocturnal	The name given to animals that are active during the night, when it is dark outside.
Regurgitate	To regurgitate means to cough something up; an owl 'coughs up' a pellet from its stomach, getting rid of anything that it cannot digest. If you do an internet search for "owl puke" you can learn a lot more!

FACTS ABOUT OWLS: QUIZ

Test your new-found knowledge about owls by answering the quiz questions below. When you are finished with the quiz, why not try and write a short story or a poem about an owl using the facts you have learned, or perhaps draw a picture of one?

1	What is an “adaptation”?	
2	What is the most common species of owl in the UK?	
3	When are most owls active, and what is the special name for this?	
4	What is an owl’s best sense?	
5	Some owls have tufts of feathers on their head – what are these called and what are they used for?	

6	Where are an owl's ears?	
7	What does it mean if an owl has yellow eyes?	
8	What is something you can do with your eyes that an owl cannot?	
9	How do owls fly silently?	
10	How does an owl eat its food?	
11	What does "regurgitate" mean?	
12	How many species of owl are native to the UK? Can you name them all?	