



by Cindy Steele

Owls...They're a Hoot!

Welcome back to Puddles' Craft Corner. Whooooo doesn't love owls? They're mysterious, nocturnal hunters who have captured our imaginations for centuries. Owls are beautiful, mysterious, intriguing, fierce, spooky, and cute. If you've ever spied this nighttime animal, you know that the owl has big, curious eyes and makes a unique "hoot" sound. Owls are most famous for their wise appearance, because their intelligent eyes glow and they stare so intensely. You may be surprised to learn that owls are very interesting creatures, and there is a lot to learn about their mysterious ways. They do a lot more than just hoot all night long!



Where Do Owls Live?

Owls can be found in all different types of habitats, and every continent except Antarctica contains species of owls. You can find owls in many habitats, from forests and deserts to mountains and prairies. It all depends on which species of owl you're talking about, and there are a staggering 150 documented species of owls (possibly even more, depending on how you classify the different species). 19 species of owls are found in North America, including the following: barn owl, burrowing owl, eastern screech owl, great grey owl, spotted owl, and the long-eared owl, among many others. Eight species of owls have been documented at Hagerman NWR, but you're most likely to see the species that actually nest on the refuge. They are the eastern screech owl, the great horned owl, the barn owl, and the barred owl.



No matter where the owl lives, one thing is certain – they are most active at night. Unlike us humans, owls are nocturnal and prefer to stay awake and be active at night. This is why a person who enjoys staying up late at night is often jokingly called a night owl! Most owls do not go through the trouble of making their own nest – they just use an old tree cavity or another's bird's old nest. This is a great way for them to protect

themselves. They blend into the colors of the tree so well that they become almost invisible.

What Do Owls Eat?

Although their diet largely depends on the species of owl, most owls like to eat insects, small mammals (like hares and rabbits), and other smaller birds. It is also common for owls to eat rodents, squirrels, bats, weasels, and woodchucks. Aren't you happy that your diet isn't like an owl's diet?



Owls very rarely drink water – they get most of the hydration they need from the prey they feast on. It is quite rare to see an owl drinking water, but you might see them taking a bath.

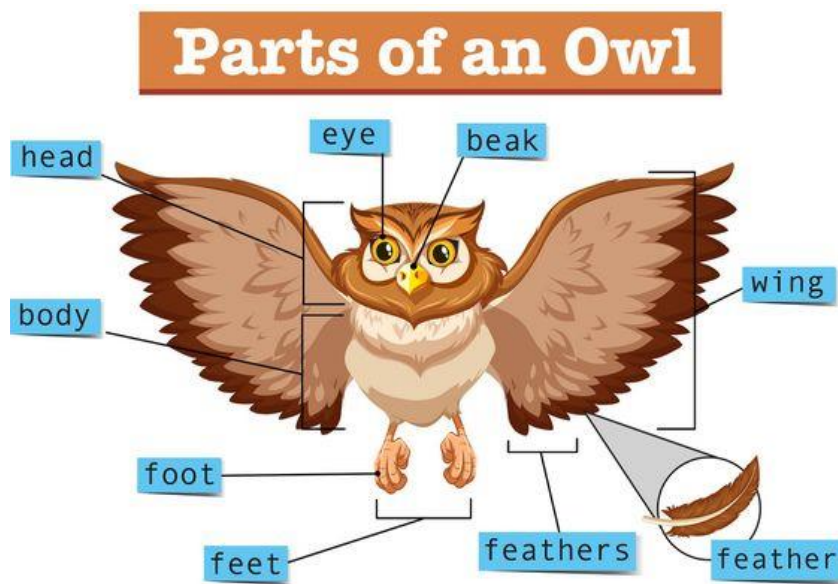
Owls cannot actually chew their food because they do not have teeth. They use their beak to tear apart their food and swallow it. They usually just gulp down the whole thing. They even swallow the parts of food that they can't digest. We don't eat bones or teeth or hair or feathers because, well, that doesn't sound very good, but also because it wouldn't do us any good. We can't digest those things, so our bodies can't turn them into energy. And that's true for owls, too. They can't digest bones, teeth, fur, or feathers. So, what does an owl do with all those parts that we would leave on our plate? Well, all birds have a special part of their digestive system called the gizzard, and it helps them either break down their food, or filter out what they can't digest. In owls, their gizzard filters out all the things that they can't digest. This way, they swallow the parts that are good for them, and they hold the other stuff like bones and fur in their gizzards. But what does the do with all the stuff that it can't digest? Their gizzard compacts, or squishes, it together into a little pellet. And when the gizzard is full, the owl regurgitates it or spits it up. That little glob of bones and fur and other stuff is an owl pellet! If you know where to

look, you can sometimes find them in the woods or other places where owls nest. Scientists love to find and study owl pellets because they can show them exactly what an owl has eaten.



What Do Owls Look Like?

Most owls have notably large eyes, a flat face, and a large head. They also have a small, hooked beak that is downturned. Owls generally have a rigid posture. Imagine trying to stand as straight as possible all of the time – the owl naturally has excellent posture! Because owls are birds of prey and hunt for their food, they have very large, sharp talons used for catching their food. There are four toes on these talons, and one is opposable (like the human thumb). This helps owls to grasp things like tree branches and prey. The size of an owl may vary, but most owls are at the lower end of the size range, with lengths of about 5–28 inches and wingspans between 1–6 feet. Females and males often look very similar, but the females are usually about 25 percent larger.



Believe It or Not – Amazing Facts About Owls



Believe it or not, although owls mostly vary in size and appearance, they have one interesting ability in common – they can turn their heads an astonishing 270 degrees!

This is thanks to their necks containing double the number of vertebrae “normal” birds have in their necks. It makes for a very funny sight to see.



Believe it or not, despite having very large eyes, owls do not have eyeballs. They actually have something more like eye tubes. Lengthened and held in place by sclerotic rings – a bony structure in the skull – this interesting feature means that owls can't really move or roll their eyes. Because owls can't roll their eyes around the way we do, they have to move their entire head to get a good look around. They frequently twist their head and “bob and weave” to expand their field of view. Owls can turn their necks in either direction, and up-and-down, without moving their shoulders!



Although owls can't move their eyes, many other adaptations help these raptors spot prey. Owl eyes are huge in comparison to their body, but there is one drawback to their large eyes. Owls are very farsighted. They can't focus on objects that are too close. Instead, sensitive whisker-like bristles around their beaks help owls detect objects at close range. Like all birds of prey, an owl's eyes face the front. This allows them to have a much greater range of vision than animals with eyes situated on the sides of their heads.

Since most owls are nocturnal, and are most active at night, two adaptations help owls see well in the dark. First, owl eyes are made up to enable them to see better than humans in nighttime darkness. And owls have what is called “eyeshine.” Eyeshine is a result of an animal’s layer of tissue behind the retina that reflects visible light. This reflection dramatically increases the light available to the animal’s eyes and gives it superior night vision.

Like many animals, owls have three eyelids. The upper eyelid closes downward when the owl blinks. The lower eyelid closes up when the owl sleeps. The third eyelid is called a nictitating membrane. This translucent eyelid moves horizontally across the eye, from the inner corner of the eye to the outer corner. The nictitating membrane is especially useful when an owl is catching prey—the owl can still see even while keeping its eyes safe from injury.

Believe it or not, owls are very silent fliers. It would be hard to escape a predator that has night vision, excellent hearing, and can swoop down upon prey in *complete* silence. Seriously, they don’t make a peep when they fly. This is due mainly to very broad wings with large surface areas that help them to float through the air without flapping too much. Less flapping makes less noise. The main reason owls can fly silently is the uniquely designed leading edges of their primary feathers. ... these soft feathers allow air to pass through which eliminates sound.



Believe it or not, despite popular belief, not all owls make that infamous “hoot” sound. Owls can actually make many different sounds – they can screech, hiss, and even growl!

Owls are truly amazing animals!

Puddles', the Blue Goose, is excited to share a fun craft about these amazing superheroes of nature! Hands-on activities are some of the best ways for kids to learn about something. Hands-on activities allow children to use their senses while learning. They see, touch, and move real objects to complete tasks. This means that science, nature, and more are amazingly brought to life! Children begin to understand the meaning behind what they are doing.

Now, let's gather up some simple materials to create our very own hooting owl hanger/ornament!

Owl Craft



Materials

1. One wood tree slice (Hobby Lobby)
2. One piece gold felt
3. Two larger yellow buttons
4. Two smaller black buttons
5. Two brown chenille stems (pipe cleaners)
6. Brown marker
7. Glue
8. Piece of yarn or jute string
9. Scissors
10. Pencil

1. Gather all materials.



2. Draw wings and feathers on wood slice with the pencil. Place the large yellow buttons on the wood to be sure of eye placement and wings. Most wood slices will come with a hole already drilled for the hanger. *Be sure to place the hole at the top of the head.



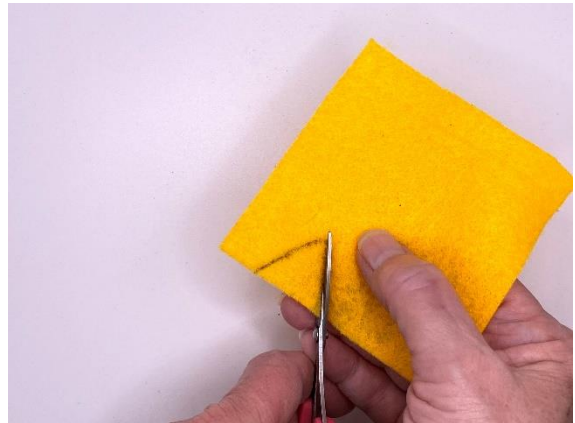
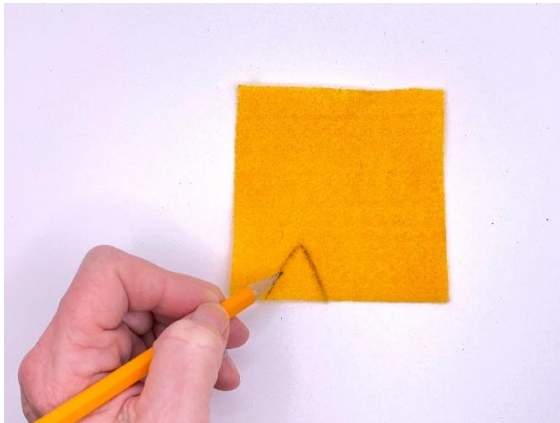
3. Trace over wings and feathers with the brown marker.



4. Glue yellow buttons on for the eyes. Then, glue the black buttons on top of the yellow buttons for the owl's pupils.



5. Trace triangular beak onto gold felt with pencil. Cut out and glue on wood slice centered between the eyes.



6. Now, cut each chenille stem into four equal pieces.



7. Twist into groups of four. This will make two claws with four talons on each. Trim as needed for length.



8. Glue the claws onto the back of the wood slice and tie on the string for hanging.



9. Now, you have the cutest hooty owl to hang and admire!



If you would like to take this one step further and learn more about owls while reading a charming children's book, here are some great books with beautiful artwork:

Owl Moon by Jane Yolen (my favorite)

Owl Babies by Martin Waddell

Little Owl's Night by Divya Srinivasan

A Little Owl on a Big Adventure by Carol Ann Finkelstein

Oliver, the Curious Owl by Chad Otis



Puddles is so excited about our upcoming October craft. Join us next month for some batty fun!