

MYTHS

ABOUT OWLS

by Alexandra Forsythe



"Owls can spin their heads all the way around."

TRUE
OR
FALSE
???



"Owls are really smart. In fact, they are the smartest birds."

There are a lot of myths about owls. This booklet addresses the myths surrounding owls and the reasons those myths are true or false.

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Water

WATER



“Owls hate water.”

FALSE

You’ve probably seen songbirds bathing in bird baths and puddles. If you keep your eyes open, you may see an owl do the same thing! Although this owl doesn’t seem happy about getting a bath, many owl species have been seen bathing in streams, lakes and even bird baths. There are even some owls that go fishing!

Genders

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“Male and female owls look alike.”

TRUE AND FALSE

At first glance, the males and females of many owl species look identical. However, in most species the female is larger than the males. Also, in some species, the colors are slightly different. The female Snowy Owl, for example, has more spots than the male.

Habitat

“Owls
live in the
woods.”



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TRUE AND FALSE

Many owl species do prefer to live in forests and woodlands. However, owls live on every continent except Antarctica and each species prefers different habitats. Some prefer open areas, others nest in burrows under the ground, and still others will build their nests in cacti in the deserts.

Spinning Heads



**“Owls
can spin
their heads
all the way
around.”**

FALSE

An owl can turn its head rather far: 270 degrees left or right from the forward facing position, and almost upside down. An owl has 14 vertebrae in its neck (twice as many as humans) and a special arrangement of the jugular veins which allow it to twist its head so far. Although the eyes have a wide range of binocular vision (seeing an object with both eyes at the same time), an owl cannot “roll” its eyes.

Nocturnal

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“Owls are nocturnal.”

TRUE AND FALSE

Many owls are nocturnal, meaning they are awake and hunt during the night. However, there are several species of owl that are active during the day, including the Short-Eared Owl (above), Great Gray, Burrowing, Snowy and Northern Hawk Owls. If food is scarce, owls may hunt day and night.

Night Vision

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“Owls see in complete darkness.”

FALSE

Owls can see in very low light but not in complete darkness. Owls usually rely on their hearing even more than their vision. The owl's face is shaped like a satellite dish which helps funnel the sounds to the owl's ears. There are some owls that are diurnal, meaning they are awake during the day, not at night, so their night vision is not as developed.

Ears

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FALSE

Although the name “ear tufts” may seem to indicate these are the owl’s ears, they are not. The ears are hidden by the feathers and are on the sides of the owl’s head. One ear is usually higher than the other to improve hearing and to help the owl pinpoint the exact location of the prey.



Sound



TRUE AND FALSE

Some owls have a call that sounds a bit like “hoot”, but every species has its own unique call. In fact, that is one of the best ways to find and identify owls: listen for the call! The Great Horned Owl’s call is “hoo-h’HOO--hoo-hoo.” The Barn Owl’s call is a harsh scream. The Eastern Screech Owl sounds a bit like a space ship! There is a such a wide variety of calls!

Types

W



FALSE

There are 37 species of owl in North America ranging from the very tiny Elf Owl to the tall Great Grey Owl. We even have an owl that looks like a mixture of owl and hawk: the Northern Hawk Owl. For more information about the North American Owls, check out my other booklet: *North American Owls* at MidwestBirdWatching.com.