

## LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

## Owls, large and small

By Cindy Kamler

Whooh whooh whooh? Halloween is just around the corner and it seems like a good time to talk about the nocturnal birds of prey that we sometimes hear, but rarely see. There are 20 species of owls found in North America (U.S. and Canada); 10 of them have been found in the Eastern Sierra. The largest is the great gray owl; the smallest is the Flammulated owl. Others include: barn, burrowing, Western screech, great horned, Northern pygmy, long-eared, short-eared and Northern saw-whet. Wildcare has seen at least one or more patients from each species.

Owls are extremely specialized creatures. They live or die based on three things that other birds of prey don't worry about: darkness, silence and hiding. The following differences separate these nocturnal birds of prey from our diurnal ones.

**Eyes:** An owl's eyes are much, much bigger than any hawk's (or eagle's) eyes. This enables them to gather more light from the moon and stars. The eyes of a great horned owl are larger than those of a large man and take up nearly all the room inside an owl's skull. They aren't sphere shaped, but elongated, shaped like a bulging barrel with rounded ends. Since they aren't ball shaped, they can't be shifted from side to side, to look left or right. They are fixed in place, forcing the owl to rotate his entire head to look left or right. The neck bones allow the head to swivel 270 degrees around. (Other birds turn only about 180 degrees.) Owls' eyes are on the front of the head, making excellent binocular vision. The eyes of other birds of prey are on the sides of the head.



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**Hearing:** In owls, one ear is higher than the other, allowing them to triangulate to the exact spot of any sound in the dark. The face is shaped like an acoustic dish or bowl that funnels all sounds right to their ears. Barn owls have such acute hearing that they can hunt prey in total darkness!

**Feathers:** Owls have unique wing and feather features that enable them to reduce locomotion-induced sound. They have large wings relative to their body mass that lets them fly as slowly as two mph for a large species like the barn owl - by gliding noiselessly with little flapping. Their feathers serve as silencers. Comb-like serrations on the leading edge of wing feathers break up the turbulent air that typically creates a swooshing sound. The velvety texture unique to owl feathers and soft fringe on a wing's trailing edge streamline the airflow and absorb the sound. Silent flight is crucial for many owls' survival. Two hypotheses attempt to explain why. "Stealthy hunting" holds that owls fly inaudibly so prey can't hear them and have less time to escape. "Prey detection" poses that silent flight aids owls in hearing and tracking prey. If you are searching for your next meal - maybe a mouse scuttling quietly in the dark - you

don't want noisy wing beats impeding your own hearing ability. Lastly, owl feathers have highly successful camouflage patterns that, along with remaining silent and still, help them disappear during the day.

**Toes:** Hawks have four toes, three facing forward and one backward. Owls can hold toes that way, but also hold two forward and two back. This makes for a better grip in the dark. Owls mostly land on top of prey and kill their dinner "the fast way" by crushing. The owl's crushing force is multiple times that of a hawk of equal size. Owls must keep silent since they are on the ground and vulnerable. If possible, the owl swallows the prey whole and takes off. Hawks most often capture their prey and lift off, not worried about a quick kill, and land elsewhere to kill and eat.

The world is dark half the time. Nature found a way to make use of all 24 hours by assigning different animals to different times of day. We have diurnal day hunters and nocturnal night hunters. To cover the gaps, there are the crepuscular dawn or dusk hunters. Hawks and owls share territories. One during the day-shift and one during the night-shift. Evolution at work.

At Wildcare, we have the occasional opportunity to see and help these "creatures of the dark." They are unique, beautiful and fascinating. Opportunities to see them in the wild are rare, but if you are interested, you can try. (Articles on "owling" can be found on Google.)

Our most common owls, great horned owls and barn owls, frequently show themselves during summer twilight. If you stake out a possible nest (often in cavities) or daytime roost, you may see them venture out. Long-



Owl feathers have highly successful camouflage patterns.

Photo courtesy of Wildcare Eastern Sierra

eared owls form large flocks (20-30) in winter, often roosting in willow-lined desert ravines. One day I snapped a twig loudly on the edge of one and about 30 long-eared (and a few short-eared) silently emerged like ghosts from the tree branches, flew a short distance and disappeared once again. Some smaller owls hunt bats or flying insects, such as moths, and might be seen near night-time lighting like street lights or porch lights. Regurgitated pellets found under trees or cavities - if bones or exoskeletons are seen - indicate the presence of owls.

Keep your eyes and ears open and you may succeed. Whooh knows?

**'Wild Spirits'**  
"Wild Spirits," Wildcare Eastern Sierra's 14th annual fundraising cele-

bration, will be at the Tri-County Fairgrounds Heritage Arts Building (formerly the Home Economics Building) on Saturday, Nov. 2, from 6 - 8 p.m. Come to the party, be a sponsor, donate an auction item-or all three.

"Last year we held 'Wild Spirits' in a totally new space; this year it will be on Saturday instead of a Sunday," announced Wildcare's Director Cindy Kamler. "Once again there will be yummy free food and wine, fun door prizes, and a wide variety of silent auction items for yourself or holiday gifts. Our furry, feathered and scaled Wildlife Ambassadors (Razzle the Raven, Spirit the Red-tailed Hawk and Belding's ground squirrel Half-Z, and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, Bumpy, will all be there, along with a reptile display and

slide show."

As a non-profit organization, Wildcare must rely on donations from individuals, local businesses, and family foundations to carry out our work. Our wildlife rehabilitation facility serves an area from Death Valley to Topaz Lake, admitting close to 500 animals (birds, mammals and reptiles) a year. We also give free education programs and provide advice and assistance for dozens of people-animal problems.

*(Living with Wildlife is a program of Wildcare Eastern Sierra (formerly Eastern Sierra Wildlife Care) dedicated to helping the people of the Eastern Sierra live in harmony with our wild neighbors. For further information, contact Executive Director Cindy Kamler at (760) 872-1487.)*



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