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Appalachian Birds of the Night:

OWLS

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“The wailing owl Screams solitary to the mournful moon.”

This quote by 18th Century Scottish poet David Mallet evokes a common perception of the owl as a creature of darkness and mystery. Often associated with ill fortune, witchcraft and even death, the owl has also been credited with powers of wisdom and prophecy.

Given the fact that the owl is a raptor (bird of prey) with nocturnal habits, its sinister reputation is not surprising. The owl's eye is perfectly equipped for night vision, with pupils able to dilate and cones dense enough to discern black and white images with minimal light. Its ear holes strategically placed for maximum effect, the owl can pick up the slightest of sounds while honing in on its source. These sophisticated sensory tools, combined with its serrated feathers, allow the owl to swoop down successfully upon its unsuspecting quarry. Forty percent of an owl's body weight is composed of chest muscles to support flight and the transport of prey.

Owls can be found on every continent except Antarctica. Species common to the Appalachians include the Common Barn Owl, Barred Owl, Eastern Screech Owl and Great Horned Owl. Most of these birds prey primarily upon rodents like mice and rats that are, like owls, most active at night.

The Common Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*), is the most widely distributed species of owl across the globe. It weighs only a pound or two, thanks to hollow bones and paper-thin skin. Almost 75 percent die in their first year. Its ability to locate prey by sound alone is the best among animals tested, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which allows them to find mice hidden by snow, vegetation or even total darkness.



Previous page: The Common Barn Owl, despite its name, prefers to nest in dead tree cavities.

Above: The Great Horned Owl gets its name from the tufts of feathers near their ears, that resemble horns.

Despite the “barn” in this owl's common name, the Common Barn Owl prefers to nest in dead tree cavities. However, its tendency to seek shelter in barns and church steeples likely came in North America around the time that pre-Colonial settlers felled trees that once served as owl habitat. It was not uncommon for settlers to experience a close encounter of the creepy kind when they entered a barn, armed only with a candle in the inky darkness that prevailed before artificial lighting. Once inside, they might be “bumped” by a startled Barn Owl that would often scream. Then the human intruders would likely find the



A pair of Screech Owls – a grey morph variety and a red morph variety – have an average weight of about seven ounces.

nearest door to make a hasty retreat, during which they often caught a glimpse of a gory mess left behind from the owl's last meal. Under those disturbing circumstances, it's not surprising that these creatures gained a sinister reputation, reflected in names like "Ghost Owls," "Death Owls" or "Hobgoblin Owls."

Another owl common to the Appalachians is the Screech Owl (*Megascops asio*), which comes in two color variations called "morphs." The red morph variety lives primarily in the southern Appalachians while the grey morph variety is



Locally, the largest concentration of Great Horned Owls occurs along the waterways like the Potomac River. These aggressive birds are powerful enough to take prey two to three times heavier than their body weight.

found in the northern Appalachians. An owl of the forest, this bird commonly nests in deciduous tree cavities. With an average weight of about seven ounces, these owls weigh about as much as a hot dog. Screech Owls are crepuscular creatures, active at dawn and dusk, most likely hunting such delicacies as mice, shrews, earthworms, snakes, big bugs and fish. They have two distinctive calls: the A-song is a mellow, muted trill while the B-song is a whinny call with descending pitches often heard during courtship.

The Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) is a chatty creature, better known as the Hoot Owl with its “hoo, hoo, too-HOO; hoo, hoo, too-HOO” calls. It’s also a survivor that can live in the wild for up to 10 years. This is not a “snow bird” that flies south for winter. The Hoot Owl has a reputation as a fierce predator of the forest, swooping down upon and scooping up its prey in the night, on land and in water.

At the top of the food chain is the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), its name derived from the tufts of feathers near their ears that resemble horns. Locally, the greatest concentration of these owls occurs along waterways like the Potomac River, according to a study conducted in the 1980s by Frostburg State University in conjunction with the Appalachian Environmental Laboratory. This seven-year study examined all nesting species of raptors native to Maryland, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

Also known as “the tiger of the woods,” these aggressive birds prey upon more than 250 species of animals, including other owls, cats, small dogs, and even rabid skunks – they have a natural immunity to rabies. The Great Horned Owl is powerful enough to take prey two to three times heavier than its body weight. Great Horned Owls have been known to grab raptor banders who climb trees to band the owls’ young during the day.

DNR aviaries across the state serve as a resource for anyone wanting to learn more about the fascinating owls native to the area. All aviary residents are rescue animals that have suffered injuries rendering them incapable of surviving in the wild on their own. Sometimes young owls are injured by falls when learning to fly. Or they may have been struck by cars when hunting along roadways. With regular meals, no predators and a congenial habitat, these owls live quite well.

Below left: Jason Caldwell of Raptors Up Close, with a Great Horned Owl. Visit his website at www.raptorsupclose.com or call 304-258-0148 for a demonstration with birds of prey.

Below right: Floyd Presley of Frostburg, MD with Screech Owls (red morph and grey morph variety).



It's the best possible situation for these creatures that now serve as ambassadors, to help their fellow creatures in the wild, by educating humans on how to coexist with them. The DNR has developed a popular educational program, Scales & Tales, to accomplish this goal. By telling each animal's story about how it came to the aviary, DNR naturalists educate listeners about related environmental issues, such as loss of habitat, environmental pollution, resource management and biodiversity. The public is also invited to visit the aviaries; for location and hours, go to www.dnr.md.gov/publiclands/all.html.

In the wild, owls help to reduce rodent populations and serve as "biomarkers" indicating potential environmental problems. Just as important, for centuries and throughout multiple cultures, owls have enriched human lives with their mysterious calls, exotic appearance and prominent role in myths and legends. A world without owls would be a dark place indeed.



A Barred Owl, better known as a Hoot Owl.



A special thanks to Sarah Milbourne, Maryland Park Service for her help and input on this story. Shown here is Ranger Milbourne, with a Barred Owl.

