

# Wildlife Express!

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## SCREECH OWLS



Photo courtesy Kenney Jeffries

# Western Screech Owl



Screech Owl  
Photo Courtesy Devin Quigley

Have you ever heard something in the night that sounds like a bouncing ball? You may have heard a western screech owl. Unlike its name, this small owl does not really screech. Its song is a series of hoots all on the same pitch. As the bird sings, its hoots get faster. This is why the song is called the bouncing ball song.

Western screech owls are found all over Idaho. They like habitats with trees including deciduous trees and conifers like pines and firs. If your community has a lot of trees, you probably have screech owls as neighbors. You have to be out at night to find them. Screech owls are nocturnal. They like the night so much that they are sometimes called dusk owls or ghost owls.

While they are not Idaho's littlest owl, they are pretty small. Screech owls are about eight inches tall and have a two-foot wingspan. They are grayish-brown with a lot of streaks, bars and spots that are brown, black, gray or white. Their feathers look a lot like tree bark. During the day, screech owls rest on branches near tree trunks. This is called roosting. Because their feathers look like tree bark, they camouflage against the tree. This makes it very hard for a predator to spot the roosting owl. Screech owls also have small ear tufts. This gives them another nickname, little horned owl. These

ear tufts also help the small owl blend into its background.

About a half-hour after sunset, screech owls become active. This is when they hunt. Favorite screech owl foods are mice, shrews, voles, salamanders, and large insects such as crickets, beetles and moths. They may even eat crayfish! Sometimes screech owls eat large animals like rabbits. During the winter months, screech owls will store food.

Screech owls begin nesting in the spring. They use cavities for nest sites. Cavities can be an old woodpecker nest, a hole in a tree or a nest box. The owls do not add any nesting material to the nest. The female lays three to five eggs and incubates them for about a month. Baby screech owls, called owlets, are very cute! They leave their nest about a month after they hatch. This is called fledging. The owlets leave the nest at night, and they usually all fledge together. Since they cannot quite fly yet, the young owls spend a lot of time perching and climbing in branches. They also exercise their wings by flapping. Once they can fly, they stay with their parents for another month before going off on their own.

Look and listen for screech owls in your neighborhood. You might be surprised at what you hear!



# Owls

Owls are birds of prey that are mostly nocturnal. They have been around for a long time. Fossils of owls have been found that are 70 to 80 million years old! Today, you can find about 155 different kinds of owls around the world. They live everywhere except Antarctica. Nineteen different kinds of owls live in North America. Twelve of them nest in Idaho. Two other species of owl, the snowy owl and the northern hawk owl, have visited Idaho, but do not nest here.

Owls can be very small like the five-inch elf owl or pretty big like the two-foot tall great gray owl. All owls look stocky with large heads and soft feathers.

Their feathers tend to be tan, brown, gray, rufous (reddish), and white. These colors help owls camouflage against tree trunks and branches. Many owls also have feathers on their legs and toes.

Owls have large eyes that face forward like your eyes. Around the eyes are the facial discs that give the owl a “face.” Their wings are long and broad, and their tails are usually short.

Owls are predators. They eat many different kinds of prey. Small owls eat small prey like large

insects and small rodents such as shrews and mice. Larger owls capture bigger prey like voles, woodrats, rabbits and squirrels. Great horned owls will even eat skunks--yuck! Other prey includes scorpions, lizards, snakes, frogs, toads, birds, bats and even fish.



Most owls do not make long migrations. They usually live in the same place all year. Sometimes, owls are forced to move because their prey becomes scarce. When this happens over a large area, many owls may leave their home territory and travel far to find food. This is called an “irruption.”

Last winter, Idaho had an irruption of snowy owls. Harry Potter’s owl, Hedwig, is a snowy owl. The snowy owls that came to Idaho were mostly young birds. During the summer, snowy owl parents had plenty of food for their babies. This meant that most of the baby owls survived. Once winter came, there were too many owls and not enough food. The young owls had to fly south to find food. Idaho was the perfect snowy owl winter vacation spot!

# What's in a Name?

When you hear the name “screech owl” what do you think? That owl must sound awful with a name like that! Actually, screech owls do not screech when they call. But to someone, somewhere, at some time, it sounded like a screech, and the name stuck.

Birds are named for many things. Some of them are named for their songs or calls. Think of the “killdeer.” They are named for their loud “killdeer, killdeer” calls. These small shorebirds certainly do not kill and eat deer! The little black-capped chickadee is named for its cheerful “chick-a-dee-dee-dee” call. The song sparrow is named for its beautiful song.

Some birds are named for the places they live. Think of the barn owl. No question where that name came from. How about the marsh wren? Or the tree swallow? Other birds are named for their colors such as the yellow warbler, the red-breasted nuthatch, or the great blue heron. Still others are named for people such as Clark’s nutcracker or Steller’s jay.

Sometimes, bird names change depending on where you live. Here in Idaho, we have a woodpecker called the northern flicker. In the southern United States, this same bird is called a yellowhammer. The spotted sandpiper

lives in Idaho. In some parts of the country, it is called a teeter-peep. Our robin got its name because it looks like the European robin.

All these different names get confusing. This is why all animals and plants have their own special scientific name. The scientific name for the western screech owl is *Megascops kennicottii*. The western screech owl is named after Robert Kennicott. He was an American explorer and naturalist that lived in the 1800s. Latin is the language of science. Scientists all over the world use Latin scientific names. By using scientific names, scientists know exactly what animal or plant they are talking about!



# The Better to Hear You

Great Gray  
Photo Courtesy IDFG

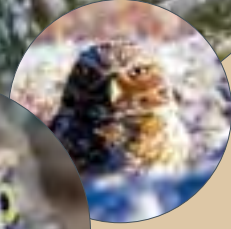
Because owls have such big eyes and good vision, we often think that they hunt by sight. Amazingly, owls hunt mainly by sound. Could you find your dinner by listening for it?

The first thing you need to know about owl ears is that they are not on the top of the owl's head. Those "ears" you see on a number of species are feathers called "ear tufts." They have nothing to do with hearing. That job is done by the ears.

Several things work together to give owls their excellent hearing. The first are the facial discs. These discs surround the owl's face and give the bird its distinctive look. Facial discs are made of several kinds of specialized feathers. These feathers collect sound around the owl's head. The facial discs work the way a satellite dish does to collect signals for your television.

Another neat adaptation owls have is asymmetrical ear placement. This means that owl ears are not directly across from one another on the bird's head. If you put your fingers in your ears and look in a mirror, your fingers will both be at the same height. If an owl put its talons in its ears, one talon would be higher on its head than the other talon. Having one ear higher on the head, means that sounds reach the owl's ears at different times. As the owl lowers or raises its head, it can turn its head so the sound reaches both ears at the same time. When this happens, it means that the source of the sound is directly in line with the owl's face. Some species of owl also have a moveable ear flap that they can use to increase or decrease the sound coming to their ears.

So, how well can owls hear? A great gray owl sitting on a fencepost 60 feet away can locate a vole running in a tunnel under 18 inches of snow. A barn owl can capture prey when blindfolded. However, they cannot capture prey if one of their ears is plugged or if they lose their facial disc feathers. For owls, when it comes to finding food, listening is definitely better than looking.



Burrowing Owls  
Photos Courtesy  
Colleen Moulton



Photo Courtesy Bruce Ackerman

# Noshing at Night or Dining in Daylight

Animals that are active at night are called nocturnal animals.

When we think of nocturnal animals, we usually think of owls. But are owls only active at night? That depends. Among the owls, enjoying the nightlife does not always mean the same thing. Some owl species are considered strictly nocturnal. These include the barn owl and long-eared owl. You usually only see these owls out at night.

Several other owls, like the great horned owl, are crepuscular (kre-PUS-cue-lar).

This means that they are most active at dawn and dusk.

Burrowing owls and Northern pygmy owls are more likely to be active during the day.

Animals that are active during the day are called diurnal (die-ER-nal) animals. These small owls eat a lot of insects. Unlike many owls, Northern pygmy owls do not have well developed facial discs to help them hear. This owl hunts mostly by sight. Because they are active during the day, their night vision is thought to be the poorest of all the owls.

So, why are these owls out hunting at different times? Many owls share the same habitats. Being active at different parts of the day and night may help reduce competition between owls. Also, different kinds of prey species are active at different times of the day and night. If an owl was strictly nocturnal and its prey was crepuscular, that owl would not be able to find its food. If owls want to eat, they need to be active when their food is awake!

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## Eye See You!

An owl's large eyes are one of the first things we notice. The size of an owl's eyes is very important for seeing at night. Because the eyes are so large, they collect a lot of light. This light hits special cells in the eye called rods. Rod cells help animals and you to see in the dark. Owls have many more rod cells than other animals. In addition, owls have a structure called the "tapetum" (ta-PETE-um) at the back of each eye. Light goes into the owl's eyes and hits the rod cells. It then bounces off the tapetum to hit the rod cells again. This lets the owl see the light two times instead of just once. For an owl, this turns the night into day.

Have you ever shone a flashlight at an animal and seen its eyes glow? If so, you have seen the tapeta at work. These structures, along with a large surface area and high numbers of rods, work together to give owls exceptional night vision. As a matter of fact, an owl can see three times better in the dark than you can.



Photo Courtesy Randy Poole

# “OWLING!”



Because they are nocturnal, observing owls can be a challenge. Being a good owl observer means using all of your observation skills. During the day, you can search for an owl roost. Just like you might have a favorite place to sit and read at home, owls tend to have favorite roosting spots. Watch for whitewash (owl poop) on the ground. You should also look for pellets. Owl pellets are made of the undigested parts of an owl's food - hair and bones. Owls cough up pellets several hours after eating. Pellets look a little like poop, but if you look closely, you will see they are made of hair and bones. To find the owl, carefully scan the tree branches. Move slowly and quietly. If you spot an owl, watch from a distance so you do not disturb it. The owl might look asleep, but it will know that you are nearby.

If you enjoy being outside at night, try listening for owls. Owl calls, like other bird songs, are part of courtship. Both the male and female owls call to each other. Great horned owls are easy to hear with their low booming “who, who-who-whooooo-who-who” calls. If you listen closely, you will notice that one owl has a lower voice. This is the male. Listen to see if you can hear the female call back. Her voice is higher. Here are some other owl calls to listen for:



## WESTERN SCREECH OWL

“pwep, pwep, pwep, pwepwepwepep”  
(like a bouncing ball)

## SAW-WHET OWL

“whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop”

## BARRED OWL

“who cooks for you, who cooks for you alllllll”

## NORTHERN PYGMY OWL

“toot, toot, toot, toot, toot, toot”



**BE OUTSIDE**  
LEAVING CHILDREN IN NATURE

Going “owling” is a lot of fun. Remember to dress warmly and bring your parents. Good places to listen for owls are parks and nature centers. Be patient, listen carefully and you might be surprised at what goes on while you are asleep!

# Screech Owl Crossword

## WORDS

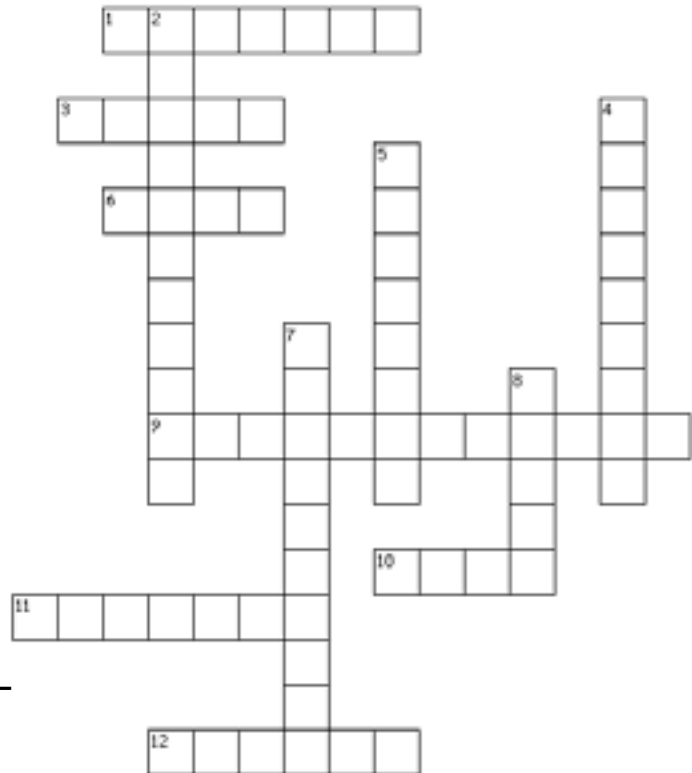
Asymmetrical    Camouflage    Cavities    Crepuscular  
Discs    Diurnal    Dusk    Nocturnal  
Owlets    Rods    Screech    Trees

### Across

1. Screech owls do not make this sound.
3. Screech owls like to roost in these.
6. Another name for the screech owl is the \_\_\_\_\_ owl.
9. Owls have \_\_\_\_\_ ears.
10. These eye cells help you see in the dark.
11. Active during the day.
12. The name for baby owls.

### Down

2. Active dawn and dusk.
4. Screech owls are \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Screech owls make their nests in these.
7. The color of a screech owl helps \_\_\_\_\_ it in a tree.
8. Facial \_\_\_\_\_ help funnel sound to an owl's ears.



## WILDLIFE EXPRESS

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