

## How Owls Hunt

By Celeste Silling

In American culture, owls are often seen as one of the wisest animals, and that might be due in part to their incredible hunting abilities. Owls are raptors, which means they spend a good deal of their days hunting. Raptors, also known as birds of prey, use talons and sharp curved beaks to kill and eat other animals. Nocturnal



Photo credit: Mike Williams

A long-eared owl peers out from a tree.

owls are different from most other raptors because of the many specialized adaptations that allow them to successfully hunt at night.

In order to catch prey, owls first have to find it. While owls have very poor color vision compared to humans, they have much better night vision. This is due to an abundance of rod cells in their eyes, the cells that help humans and animals see in dim light.

Unlike most other birds, owls have binocular vision, which means that their eyes are located at the front of their heads, rather than at the sides. Binocular vision helps animals better judge the size, speed, and distance of objects, a perfect characteristic for hunters. The eyes themselves cannot move from their forward-facing position, but the owl makes up for this by moving its head 270 degrees in both directions.

An owl's specialized hearing can also help it locate prey. Despite common misconception, the two tufts on the top of owl's head are not its ears. An owl's ears take the form of two small slits hidden under its feathers on either side of its head.

To help funnel noise into the ears, the feathers on an owl's face are arranged into rings known as the facial disc. The facial disc captures and redirects sound like a satellite dish funnels signals. Some owls even have their ears unevenly placed on the sides of their head, which helps them figure out what direction and height sounds are coming from.

When hunting at night, predators have to be quiet in order to sneak up on prey. Nocturnal prey animals often have excellent hearing in order to make up for the lack of light to see by. Owls have the ability to fly silently through the night, sneaking up on prey with even the best hearing.

Their impressive stealth is due to the specialized feathers on an owl's wings. The feathers on the forward edge of the wing have stiff fringe, and the feathers on the back have soft fringe. This hair-like edging softens the air flowing over the wings, muffling the sound it makes as the wing flies through it.

Owls have four toes on each foot with sharp talons for catching prey. When perching, two toes face forward and two face backwards, providing a secure grip on the perch. When the owl is reaching for prey, however, one of the backwards toes has the ability to move forward, so that there are three toes facing forward. In this formation, the owl can better catch, squeeze, and kill its prey.

The next time you see an owl, try to view it from the prey's point of view. An owl can see you when you can't see it, hear you no matter where you hide, sneak silently up on you, and snatch you up in an inescapable death grip! Whether owls are wise or not, they are certainly some of nature's most impressive hunters.