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BARN OWL (*Tyto alba*)



Identifying Marks: Wingspan 44 inches; length 16 inches. A slender, long-legged, mid-size owl with no ear tufts. This buff-colored bird has a distinctive heart-shaped face trimmed in tan. When viewed from below, the barn owl looks mostly white and can appear ghostly.

Habitat: Widespread in open country such as marshes, farmers' fields, grasslands, and deserts. Also lives in cities and suburbs.

Nest: It uses cavities in a wide variety of locations including hollow trees, cliffs, riverbanks, barn lofts, church steeples, and nest boxes.

Diet: Meadow mice, also called voles, make up the bulk of this owl's menu. It rarely takes prey larger than a rat.

Voice: An assortment of abrasive shrieks, screeches, and hisses described as *kksssch*, *sshnaairrk*, and *whesshpp*. These calls remind some of an espresso coffee machine.

Comments: When disturbed or threatened, the barn owl performs a fascinating defensive display called "toe dusting." While loudly hissing and clacking its beak, the owl leans over, squints its eyes, opens its wings and sways its body. As it shifts from foot to foot, it intermittently looks down, almost touching the ground with its bill, and sweeps its head from side to side.

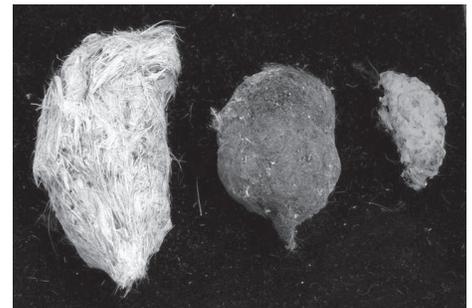
Casting Pellets

Cough It Up: Pellets are made of indigestible materials, such as bones, teeth, and beaks enclosed in feathers or fur. These pellets are spit up or cast by birds. If you have ever dissected an owl pellet, it probably came from a barn owl. Birds other than owls, such as hawks, herons, vultures, gulls, and crows, produce pellets.

Raptor's Digest: An owl's digestive system dissolves a prey's soft tissues as it separates the indigestible material. The dissolved tissues continue on, nourishing the bird, while the pellet is held for later regurgitation. The minimum amount of time it takes a barn owl to make a pellet out of a mouse is 6.5 hours. A freshly cast pellet is covered with a slimy lubricant.

The Leg Bone's Connected to the... Most of the information you read about raptor diets are based on pellet studies. The bones found in pellets are a virtual who's who of what owls eat. Occasionally, a band (a numbered metal tag) from a prey bird turns up in a predator's pellet!

State and federal permits are required to keep wildlife for educational purposes.



A great horned owl pellet, which is normally 3 - 4 inches long, is on the left. The dark barn owl pellet is in the middle. A screech-owl pellet, which is usually 1 - 1.5 inches long, is on the right.