

## Owls in Black & White

Owls are special because they remind us of us! With their eyes on the front of their face—necessary for the binocular vision that makes them such superb hunters— they look more humanlike than most birds. Owls are also special because they are among the few groups of birds that are well known by the non-birding public. Essentially everyone knows that owls are night creatures—at least for the most part. In the day, they tend to rest, sometimes inside roosting cavities and other times using their camouflaged plumage to blend into their surroundings.

Owls are not usually thought of as identification challenges—the real effort is in finding them! Even so, there are some tricky species, and some general issues to think about with owls.

Think about the lifestyle of owls. They have excellent vision and incredible hearing. Their eyes work amazingly well at night because they are packed with light-sensitive rods, making them 100 times more sensitive than human eyes. However, rods—as opposed to cones, the other light-sensing structures in the eyes—are not good for sensing color. This means that although owls are adept at finding things in the dark, the night world pretty much appears to them in black and white. This is quite unlike most birds, which have eyes packed with cones and are most active in the colorful world of daylight.

It is clear from an owl's eye structure why being as colorful as a cardinal or painted bunting makes no sense for them. Where owl coloration does matter is in camouflage—keeping them from being found by pesky mobbing birds, or potential predators in the case of smaller owls. This is why owl plumages are so amazingly patterned, intricate, and of wood-colored tones—so they can blend in against bark or cliffs, or in the case of short-eared owls, dry grass and marsh.

Take this a step further and you can understand that an owl's plumage matches its surroundings. It is not geared to tell potential mates “Hey, I am a great horned” or “Hey, I am a long-eared,” in the way that Technicolor plumages are used by many diurnal birds. The species calling card of an owl is voice! Owls identify one another's gender, species, and territorial intents through their voices. This leads to something rather unusual, although it does occur in some diurnal birds such as flycatchers: Different owl species can look exactly alike or nearly so, but they differ noticeably in voice. Thus, in some cases it is easier to identify an owl by hearing it than by seeing it.

Perhaps one of the most widespread, well known, and commonly heard owls in North America is the great horned owl. It is named for the “horns,” or ear tufts—which are actually feather tufts, not ears—protruding from its head.

Another field mark to look for on many owls is a white area near the throat. This white patch shows up clearly at night when the owl is singing, moving and inflating its throat. On the great horned, this white patch is extensive and can easily be seen even when the bird is at rest. There is no such patch on the long-eared owl.

Owls offer many challenges— and I haven't even touched on the screech-owls or barn owls. Or, for that matter, on how vocalizations play a part in finding and identifying owls. Perhaps it's best to leave those topics for another article!

For now, suffice it to say that owls sure can trip us up here and there—particularly at night. The challenge is that we rely heavily on plumage to tell birds apart, and owls are one group where plumage is largely irrelevant to the birds themselves in telling each other apart. What we see in poor light is so far away from what the books show us that identifying overall patterns and thinking of owls in black and white can really help. Just another example that drives home the point that owls are different and they are very cool birds!

Taken with permission from Bird Watcher's Digest. Written by Alvaro Jaramillo.