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what is an owl?

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Stephen Moss

THE OWL

A Biography

VINTAGE

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What is an Owl?

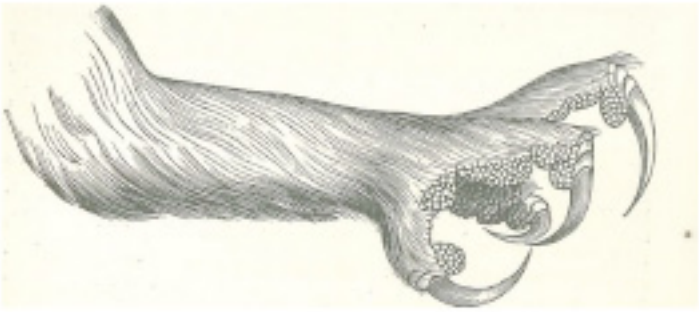
> *Any bird of prey of the order Strigiformes … typically nocturnal and characterized by a large rounded head, raptorial beak, soft plumage, upright posture, and large eyes directed forwards and surrounded by a shallow cone of radiating feathers.*
>
> *Oxford English Dictionary*

The world's 10,800 or so species of bird – classified into roughly 250 different families – are wonderfully diverse. Yet the majority of birders, ornithologists, and indeed the general public, would surely agree that owls are, quite simply, unique.

Some other bird families, including the nightjars, nighthawks, frogmouths and potoos, are, like owls, largely nocturnal, while some species in other groups are also active after dark, such as parrots (kakapo and night parrot), waders (stone-curlew and the other thick-knees), seabirds (shearwaters and petrels), night herons, kiwis, and the nightingale. And, of course, many other species of bird frequently feed or sing under cover of darkness. But owls have adapted more radically than any other group of birds to a life lived mostly at night, and this is reflected in their appearance, morphology, habits and lifestyle.

Ancient writers placed owls alongside other predatory species that have hooked beaks and powerful claws, lumping them together as 'accipitres', or 'rapacious birds', and considering them to be closely related to diurnal raptors such as hawks and falcons. More recently, it was thought that they shared an evolutionary line with another predominately nocturnal family, nightjars. But as Mike Toms reveals in his comprehensive Collins New Naturalist volume *Owls*, the latest molecular analysis suggests that the apparent similarity of owls to nightjars is actually the result of convergent evolution: because both groups hunt at night, using similar techniques, they have developed superficial similarities in appearance.

This new scientific analysis places owls in the supergroup Coronaves, where they do indeed sit next to day-flying birds of prey: the order Accipitriformes, which includes hawks, eagles, kites, harriers and vultures (but not falcons, which are more closely related to parrots). So by linking owls with hawks, those early ornithologists were at least partly correct.



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Nevertheless, being in their own separate order, Strigiformes, owls are sufficiently different to have their own unique and special features. They have a characteristically upright posture when perched, a large, broad head, extremely good hearing, powerful night vision and very soft, dense feathers that allow them to fly almost silently – and very slowly – when hunting their prey. As the eighteenth-century naturalist and vicar Gilbert White observed, ‘Owls move in a buoyant manner, as if lighter than the air; they seem to want ballast.’

Other key features, which owls mostly share with other predators, include forward-facing eyes, giving them binocular vision; sharp talons, enabling them to seize and hold their prey without it escaping; and a sharp, down-curved, hooked bill. Typically, they are solitary (except when breeding) and mostly – though not always – nocturnal.

Unlike most diurnal raptors, however, owls often have a mottled, camouflaged plumage, mimicking both the colour and texture of their surroundings; this enables them to blend in very well with their background, and thus avoid being seen. That is even true of the most superficially obvious of owls, the snowy owl, whose bright white plumage, sometimes speckled with black, fits in surprisingly well with its typical surroundings of snow, and lichen-covered rocks and boulders.

If you are lucky enough to get a close-up view of an owl – perhaps at a daytime roost – you will notice that although overall the plumage is cryptic, some species have distinctive markings on their faces, brightly-coloured irises in their eyes (often yellow or orange) or, as with the long-eared and short-eared owls, distinctive ear tufts. All these features are used, especially by those birds that live in more open and less forested habitats such as moorland or grassland, to signal to one another at dawn or dusk.

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They are, as noted by the nineteenth-century ornithologist Robert Mudie, author of *The Feathered Tribes of the British Isles*, surprisingly light, despite ‘the apparent bulk of their bodies. An owl, in its plumage, looks a thick, stout, and even clumsy bird; but strip off the feathers, and it is really nothing.’

Mudie goes on to point out that ‘The great owl *Strix bubo* [i.e. eagle owl], the size of which has been compared to that of the eagle, is not one-fourth of the weight.’ Although this is an exaggeration – typically an eagle owl weighs about half as much as a golden eagle – his general point holds: owls are indeed much lighter than you might expect, as anyone who has ever had a captive barn owl perch on their wrist will know.

Although all owls are in the order Strigiformes, they have been subdivided into two different families: Strigidae (the true or typical owls), and Tytonidae (barn, masked and grass owls). The vast majority of species – well over 200 – are in the former group, with only about twenty in the latter, including our own familiar barn owl.

Owls are among the most widespread and adaptable of all the world’s birds, found in all the world’s geographical and ecological regions apart from a handful of remote, oceanic islands. Although mainly sedentary,

roughly one in ten species are prone to wandering; indeed, a recent authoritative study, *Vagrancy in Birds* by Alexander Lees and James Gilroy, suggests that the difficulty in locating vagrant owls might be masking the true extent of their global travels.

As owls have, over time, spread around the world, they have managed to colonise a very wide variety of habitats, including dense tropical, temperate broad-leaved and northern boreal forests, grasslands and farmlands, coastal estuaries, freshwater marshes, Arctic tundra, islands and even the busy heart of our cities – I have occasionally heard tawny owls hooting even in the middle of London. In the process of successfully exploiting so many different habitats, they have adapted to survive and thrive in many different ways, although still remaining recognisably owls in their appearance, lifestyle and behaviour.

The world’s two largest species of owl – Blakiston’s fish owl and the marginally smaller Eurasian eagle owl – are huge and daunting predators: female Blakiston’s fish owls can grow to 72 cm (28.3 inches) long, with a 180-cm (71-inch) wingspan, and weigh as much as 4.6 gm (over 10 lb). This is more than five times longer, and almost 150 times heavier, than the world’s smallest species, the elf owl of North America, which at 13.5 cm (a shade over 5 inches), and weighing just 31 gm (barely more than one ounce), is actually smaller and lighter than the house sparrow. Two other very small species are the Tamaulipas pygmy owl, endemic to the mountain forests of

north-eastern Mexico, and the long-whiskered owlet, which is restricted to a tiny area of the Andes cloud forests in northern Peru.

Large or small, one thing that unites owls, certainly compared with many other bird families, is their fairly uniform body shape and appearance – what scientists call their anatomy. One of their most characteristic features – although not easy to see unless you are looking at an owl's skeleton – is that they have a very broad skull, with a flat front.

This unique feature gives owls two major advantages: first, it allows room for large, round eyes that face more directly forward than those of other birds, including diurnal birds of prey. Second, the broad skull means that owls' ears are placed further apart than in other birds; so that sounds reach their ears at slightly different times.

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Unlike on other birds, their eyes are tubular rather than round, which, along with a higher proportion of light-sensitive rods, rather than colour-sensitive cones, gives them the ability to see well after dark. However, these adaptations also mean that owls are long-sighted, and so are unable to focus on close objects, and less good at distinguishing between colours.

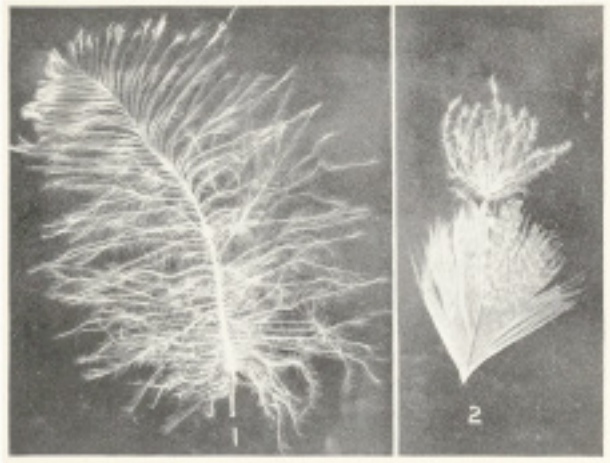
In strong sunlight they can struggle to see at all, so they try to avoid being exposed to this whenever possible. As Gilbert White's contemporary, Thomas Bewick, observed, 'Unable to bear the brighter light of the sun, it retires to some lonely retreat, where it passes the day in silence and obscurity.'

When an owl is hunting – often under cover of darkness, when it is usually unable to use sight to find its prey – it will rely on its hearing. That is

also often true during daylight hours, as many of the species targeted by a hunting owl, especially small mammals, do not normally show themselves, but instead hide away in long grass, dense leaves or heavy snow.

But using its ears to locate prey poses another problem: how will the owl hear the target over the sound of the air rushing through its wings? To reduce this extraneous noise to almost zero, owls have a series of small hooks and barbs on the edges of their flight feathers, which break up the air as it flows over the front edge of their wings, and channel it along their wings to the ends. This has the effect of reducing turbulence, and allows the birds to fly almost completely silently, as another early writer on birds, the Scottish ornithologist William MacGillivray, explained:

> In accordance with the nocturnal habits of the Owls, a peculiarly noiseless and silent flight was necessary, to enable them to steal unawares upon a timid and vigilant [victim], and hover with ease while searching for a concealed or lurking prey … So gentle is the motion of their downy wings, that one is not by hearing rendered sensible of their immediate presence.



1, Tawny Owl: Loosely constructed feather of juvenile plumage with one short filament of aftershaft down adhering near tip. 2, Barn Owl: First winter feather with long 2nd aftershaft down adhering to its tip and two filaments of very short 1st aftershaft down adhering to tips of 2nd aftershaft down.

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As well as this remarkable adaptation for silent flight, owls have developed another unique modification to their hearing. Some species,

including the barn owls, as we have seen, and the Tengmalm's (also known as boreal) owl of northern Europe, have ears placed asymmetrically, one slightly higher than the other, to enable the bird to pinpoint the exact origin of a sound. This means that their skulls are lopsided.

These two species, along with others, including the Ural, great grey and saw-whet owls, have a very obvious, heart-shaped facial disk, which acts rather like a wildlife sound recordist's parabolic reflector, focusing and concentrating distant sounds into their ears. Try cupping your hands behind your ears when you listen to birdsong, and you'll appreciate the genuine improvement it brings in volume and clarity. This adaptation gives owls a real advantage when hunting, as it enables them to locate the rustle of a mouse or vole precisely. They also have a well-developed medulla, the part of the brain which enables a creature to aurally 'map' an area around itself, and in this further refine the owl's targeting of its prey.

Because a hunting owl hears the sound of its prey through its asymmetrical ears at slightly different times, it turns its head until the sounds arrive simultaneously, at which point it knows it is heading in the right direction. As the owl approaches its target, at the last moment it changes its body configuration, extending the talons out in front of its body, before striking quickly and efficiently to grab the unfortunate victim.

Once an owl has successfully caught its prey, it uses its short, curved bill, with that hooked tip and serrated edges, to tear apart its victim so it can feed. The bill is noticeably different in shape from that of diurnal raptors: instead of protruding in front of the bird, it faces downwards, and is closely tucked into the owl's face. When an owl is hunting, this gives it a clear field of vision, and avoids deflecting any incoming sound waves away from the facial disk.

Owls do, of course, use their eyesight, both for hunting, and to avoid predators – especially important for smaller species such as the little owl of Britain and Europe and the elf owl of North America. But this is where their front-facing eyes put them at a slight disadvantage, as they are unable to swivel them to look from side to side, as we can.

They have solved this problem by evolving the ability to rotate their necks and heads up to 270 degrees – three-quarters of an entire circle. They are able to do so because they have twice as many neck vertebrae as us – fourteen compared with just seven for humans – and other adaptations, which prevent the blood being cut off to their brain when they twist their head around.

Owls feed on a wide range of different prey, although for the majority of species the main items are small mammals, including rodents, such as rats, mice, voles and lemmings; lagomorphs (rabbits and hares); and insectivores (shrews, moles and occasionally hedgehogs); while the larger species of owl may also take medium-sized mammals such as foxes.

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In general, much of the mammalian prey on which owls feed comes under the category often termed ‘vermin’ or ‘pests’, which led the Victorian author (and Bishop of Norwich) Edward Stanley to commend them for their usefulness to mankind: ‘We may say a more useful race of birds does not exist; since … their food consists entirely of vermin very prejudicial to our crops, and which, but for these nocturnal hunters, might do serious mischief.’

Most species of owl will take birds when they are available, the eagle owls even hunting down other avian predators such as buzzards, hawks and falcons. Smaller species, such as scops and screech owls, feed mostly on insects such as worms, moths and beetles; while others, including several Asian and African species, like Blakiston’s fish owl of Japan and Pel’s fishing owl of sub-Saharan Africa, specialise in hunting fish.

Even our own familiar tawny and barn owls will occasionally choose an aquatic diet: the Victorian explorer and early conservationist Charles Waterton was watching a barn owl hunting on a fine July evening, when ‘all

of a sudden she dropt perpendicularly into the water.' Thinking she had come to some harm, he continued to observe, and then 'I saw the owl rise out of the water with a fish in her claws, and take it to the nest.'

We know more about the diet of owls not just by observing them hunt – which can be tricky, given their mostly nocturnal habits – but also because, like many other birds, they regurgitate 'pellets'. These are spherical or oblong objects, a few centimetres in diameter, which contain all the material the owl has eaten but cannot digest, such as the fur, feathers, bones, claws and teeth from their victims. Typically, an owl will expel one pellet a couple of hours after each meal, and will not be able to feed again until it has done so.

Studying these pellets, usually by delicately pulling them apart and examining the contents with a magnifying glass, allows scientists to get a very clear idea of what a particular bird, or population of birds, is eating. With owls, pellets are fairly easy to find, often by searching beneath the trees or bushes where the birds roost. Looking at the contents can produce some unexpected surprises: for example, bird rings, which are accidentally consumed by any owls that regularly feed on avian prey.

Owls are not just hunters; they can also be hunted. Larger species like the eagle owls and fish owls have very few predators (apart, of course, from man) because of their size, and because they are at or near the top of the food chain. Nevertheless, European eagle owls have been predated by white-tailed and golden eagles, while in turn they will regularly hunt other, smaller species of owl.

All owls are vulnerable to being caught and killed by mammalian predators, especially when the female is on the nest, with chicks or eggs. Foxes, stoats and weasels, and almost any other opportunistic predator, will grab an easy meal if they can, as will snakes, especially in the tropics, and – if they get the chance – domestic dogs and cats.

Though owls are vulnerable to human interference, persecution and superstition, however, they are also widely celebrated, revered and loved, as the next chapter, 'Owls and Us', shows.

2

Owls and Us

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds …
Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower,
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Thomas Gray, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1751)

'The very name', wrote ornithologist Robert Mudie in 1834, 'is a name of lamentation, expressive of the sound of its note, which is one of the most melancholy love-songs in the whole chorus of nature. Superstition has accordingly laid hold of the bird, as one of the instruments with which to bind the ignorant in fetters of fear.'

Like so many other English bird names, 'owl' is onomatopoeic, based on the bird's sound. It derives from Germanic languages, going back to at least before the birth of Christ, and almost certainly much further. Its first written appearance in what is recognisably English – spelt phonetically, as 'hule' – dates back to around AD 1250 (perhaps even earlier), in the title of the medieval poem 'The Owl and the Nightingale'.

The sense of owls as primeval beings from an unimaginably past time is captured in the lines quoted at the start of this chapter, from one of the best-known and best-loved poems in the English language, Thomas Gray's mid-eighteenth-century 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', as the unnamed human intruder disturbs the owl's 'ancient solitary reign'. This shadowy, spectral aura is reinforced, as Robert Mudie noted in an evocative passage, by the nature of the places where owls live:

> Deep shady groves, hollow-trees, crumbling ruins clad with ivy, steeples and churches with their associations of graves and ghosts – all that seems dim to the reason of man, all that stands monumental of the works of nature … The owls, in these places – often heard, but seldom seen: when heard, heard in the gloom and the stillness of the night; and when seen, appearing with something of judge-like solemnity – made them very readily convertible into a sort of 'doom-birds'.

But this association with superstition and portent, which runs through our culture and literature from the earliest times, is not confined to the past. Owls remain at the centre of modern myths, legends, stories, poems, songs and popular culture, wherever in the world we look. As I suggested in the Prologue, this is largely down to their mostly nocturnal nature, the very

antithesis of our own diurnal lifestyle, but also, perhaps, because our encounters with their world tend to be transitory and indeterminate.

Much like other birds central to our folklore, such as the raven, our conception of owls' meaning and significance is very fluid – and often utterly contradictory. They can be cute and cuddly, or cruel and vicious; good, or evil; bringers of wisdom, or messengers of doom, death and destruction. Owls can be all things to all people: a template onto which we project our own feelings and beliefs.

The darker side of owl mythology features prominently in *Metamorphoses*, a narrative poem written in Latin by the Roman poet Ovid, dating back over 2,000 years to about the time of the birth of Christ. In one memorable episode, the goddess Persephone, having been abducted and forced to remain as queen of the underworld for half the year, flies into a rage when given a message confirming her fate by Ascalaphus. In a classic case of 'blaming the messenger', she turns the unfortunate man into an owl – a bird of ill-omen, as in this evocative translation from the Greek by the first Poet Laureate, John Dryden:

> But now a queen, she with resentment heard,
> And chang'd the vile informer to a bird.
> In Phlegeton's black stream her hand she dips,
> Sprinkles his head, and wets his babling lips.
> Soon on his face, bedropt with magick dew,
> A change appear'd, and gawdy feathers grew.
> A crooked beak the place of nose supplies,
> Rounder his head, and larger are his eyes.
> His arms and body waste, but are supply'd
> With yellow pinions flagging on each side.
> His nails grow crooked, and are turn'd to claws,
> And lazily along his heavy wings he draws.
> Ill-omen'd in his form, the unlucky fowl,
> Abhorr'd by men, and call'd a scrieching owl.

The Romans believed that if an owl were nailed to a door, this would avert evil; yet they simultaneously thought that witches could turn into owls and suck the blood of babies. The deaths of key Romans, including Julius Caesar, Augustus and Agrippa, were supposedly foretold by the unexpected

appearance of owls during the daytime. In the opening Act of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the owl is 'the bird of night', an augurer, which

> yesterday, did sit
> Even at noon-day, upon the marketplace,
> Hooting and shrieking.

Another story tells of how the unexpected appearance of owls during the daytime in Rome portended the Romans' impending defeat by the Parthians at Carrhae, on the plains of the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates in present-day Turkey. The generals failed to heed the birds' warning and, despite a huge superiority of numbers, their army was soundly beaten. With as many as 20,000 men killed and a further 10,000 taken prisoner, this was one of the most humiliating defeats in the history of the Roman Empire.

A wide range of owls, most notably the 'horned owl', which we now call the eagle owl, are condemned by Pliny the Elder, the first century AD Roman writer and naturalist, in his masterwork *Natural History*, for their malign portent:

> The horned owl is especially funereal, and is greatly abhorred in all auspices of a public nature: it inhabits deserted places, and not only desolate spots, but those of a frightful and inaccessible nature: the monster of the night, its voice is heard, not with any tuneful note, but emitting a sort of shriek. Hence it is that it is looked upon as a direful omen to see it in a city, or even so much as in the day-time.

In the same work, however, he apparently recommends two raw owls' eggs (or alternatively a decapitated, and then fried, canary) as a hangover cure!

Several centuries earlier than Pliny and Ovid, the Ancient Greeks had a rather more positive attitude towards owls; especially the little owl, which was closely associated with the goddess Athene. As well as the terracotta vase featuring Athene looking at a hovering little owl I discuss in Chapter 5, another precious vase, dating back to *c.* 500 BC, features the bird as its principal image, alongside an inscription reading 'ΔΕΜΟΣΙΟΣ' – in modern script, DEMOSIOS – meaning 'belonging to the people'. Such depictions of the little owl in Ancient Greek culture appear to be the start of that long and enduring link between owls and wisdom.

Between the Greek and Roman eras, the Old Testament of the Bible, composed from roughly 1500 BC to 400 BC, frequently mentions owls – almost always negatively. Under Judaism's Mosaic Law they were regarded, along with other birds of prey and scavengers such as crows, ravens and vultures, as 'unclean', as this remarkably comprehensive list from the Book of Leviticus shows:

> These are the birds you are to regard as unclean and not eat because they are unclean: the eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, the red kite, any kind of black kite, any kind of raven, the horned owl, the screech owl, the gull, any kind of hawk, the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, the white owl, the desert owl, the osprey, the stork, any kind of heron, the hoopoe and the bat.

An apocalyptic – and again superbly detailed – passage from Isaiah illustrates how owls can come to symbolise mourning, loneliness, and also the desolation consequent on divine retribution, as it warns of the vengeance of the Lord on the land:

> The desert owl and screech owl will possess it; the great owl and the raven will nest there … Thorns will overrun her citadels, nettles and brambles her strongholds. She will become a haunt for jackals, a home for owls.

Other societies cast owls in different roles. Native Americans saw owls as guardians of knowledge, and also as messengers between this world and the afterlife. They were regarded as soothsayers, able to predict cold weather; something likely to have a basis in truth. When the great grey owl was out hunting, freezing weather was thought to be imminent, meaning that the fire should be stoked and more wood gathered. But the sound of an owl might also be a sign that the spirits were calling you. If you answered the call of a boreal owl with a whistle, but the owl failed to call back, death would soon follow. Even dreaming about an owl was bad news – again, signifying imminent death. The Cheyenne tribe, however, regarded owls as the protective spirits of the night, and would wear their feathers in battle to give them, it was believed, the ability to move silently at night and see in the dark.

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Owls often feature in the folklore of other ancient cultures as emissaries from other worlds. For the Aztecs of Mexico, and the Hindus of India, they brought messages from beyond the grave, while the Aborigines of Australia connected them with a bogeyman who seized and ate children.

Across much of the world – including Britain and Europe – people have long regarded owls as being connected with sorcery and evil, and harbingers of death. The cultural historian Boria Sax notes that owls might represent the dangers of the unknown – woods and forests – historically regarded as 'the domain of sorcerers and dangerous beasts', as opposed to the relative security of the village. This idea can be found in many European fairy tales, in which the mysterious forest surrounding human habitations is the home of scary and potentially lethal creatures, such as the wolf in 'Little Red Riding Hood'.

Unfortunately, in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, those beliefs have led to the birds being widely persecuted and killed for food, medicine and witchcraft – indeed, they still do, as a scholarly and detailed study reveals. 'Owls Used as Food and Medicine and for Witchcraft in Africa' was published in 2022 by the world's leading owl expert, Finnish ornithologist Heimo Mikkola.

Between 1996 and 2002, Dr Mikkola and his colleagues carried out extensive face-to-face interviews in twenty different African countries, speaking to people responsible for hundreds of owl killings.[fn1] Acutely sensitive to being accused of cultural appropriation or post-colonial attitudes,

Mikkola (who lived in six different African countries for more than two decades, and worked in over thirty more) co-operated closely with cultural experts from the regions involved, who conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews using a questionnaire translated into a wide range of regional languages.

The findings were fascinating, if rather depressing: in roughly one in six cases, the birds were killed because they were seen as an ill omen, likely to bring death or disaster. In another one in six cases, they were killed for food, although in Sierra Leone, where food shortages are more common, that figure rose to almost half. A smaller proportion – about 6 per cent – were used in traditional medicine, and a further 28 per cent for magic and witchcraft; including the belief that sacrificing an owl would result in the death of another human being.

Mikkola points out that the victims were simply seen as ‘owls’, with no distinction being made between rare and endangered, as opposed to common and widespread. As a result, the victims included several very rare species, including the critically endangered Anjouan and Mohéli scops owls (both endemic to the Comoro Islands, between Mozambique and Madagascar), and the rufous fishing owl of West Africa.

Persecution of owls – for a wide range of cultural and practical reasons – is far from confined to these regions. As already noted, Judaism has long considered owls – along with other raptors – as ‘unclean’, while farmers in Europe and North America have in the past often killed owls, even though these help reduce the numbers of rodents in their barns. According to Mark Cocker, in parts of France and Switzerland, as recently as the 1960s, barn owls were regularly nailed to the doors of farm buildings to ward off evil.

Back in Britain, similar fears are harboured: the barn owl leads the way in folklore and superstition – indeed, wherever they are found around the world, barn owls play their part in tales of horror, ghosts and spirits: a recent survey of 300 people in the UK found that almost two in five considered owls to be ‘scary’.

A barn owl might also be the explanation behind a curious and rather chilling modern tale, of the Cornish ‘Owlman’. The story begins on an April day in 1976, when two young sisters were playing in the churchyard at Mawnan, just south of Falmouth, while their mother and father prepared a picnic nearby. A few minutes later, the girls returned to their parents, terrified at what they claimed to have seen: a large, bird-like human, with long, rounded wings, hovering menacingly over the church tower.

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An account of this strange phenomenon, together with a drawing the family had made, was later published in the paranormal publication the *Fortean Times*, following which – surprise, surprise – more sightings were reported. If we discount the possibility that these were some kind of spoof made by a local wanting to scare visitors to the churchyard (unlikely, given that there were only a handful of reports over twenty years), it seems most likely that what the witnesses actually saw was simply a barn owl, emerging unexpectedly from its daytime roost.

The notion that the Owlman is an urban (or in this case, rural) myth gains credence from a video taken in 2017, in the city of Visakhapatnam, in India's Andhra Pradesh. The video, which soon went viral on social media, appears to show two extra-terrestrial aliens, with thin, white bodies, standing bolt upright, while staring back at the camera with empty black eye sockets. In fact, the 'aliens' were baby barn owls, about two or three weeks old, which, having been startled by a human intruder, had risen up onto their feet and were rocking nervously from side to side.

The 'aliens' and Owlman mysteries aside, we might assume that these mostly ancient – and to be honest often rather bizarre – beliefs have no place in modern culture and society. Yet the popularity of owls, regarded in both positive and negative ways, does not appear to be fading. Of modern incarnations, the most famous is Hedwig the snowy owl, in the Harry Potter books and films (see Chapter 7).

Countless other children’s stories feature a (usually comforting) owl character, such as ‘Wol’ in A. A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh books, and Edward Lear’s nonsense verse ‘The Owl and the Pussycat’, while Pablo Picasso, Florence Nightingale and Theodore Roosevelt all kept pet owls. The Oscar-nominated actor Salma Hayek even gave a pet scops owl to her husband, François-Henri Pinault – after all, what else can you give a billionaire?

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Sometimes the fascination with owls is positively educational: the wildlife artist Robert Fuller, based in the Yorkshire Wolds, has more than 100 hidden cameras broadcasting live feeds on the Internet. Of these, the most popular are his local barn, tawny and little owls: one brief video clip of a young barn owl reacting to the sound of thunder has had 24 million views and almost one million ‘likes’.

Other representations of owls in western societies are, unfortunately, more commercialised, cheap and tacky. Typical owl trinketry is the unidentifiable, identikit version with large eyes and a cute appearance used to flog jewellery, plant pots, toys, pillows, garden ornaments, clothing, arts and crafts, and much else. Owl merchandising has a long pedigree: in December 2022, Spanish scientists revealed that the very first mass-produced children’s toy was not some post-war product, nor even a Victorian curiosity; it was a piece of slate-carved sand decorated in the recognisable shape and image of an owl, found in a tomb that was more than 5,000 years old.

The main reason why we are so fascinated by owls surely comes down to their appearance: very few animals, apart from primates such as orang-utans, gorillas and chimpanzees, and perhaps dolphins, have a ‘face’, like us. The owl’s huge eyes, and the large, rounded head, are almost a Disney caricature of what we imagine a cute creature should look like.

In which case, why have owls consistently triggered the very opposite effect in us: unease – even terror? Here the concept of the ‘uncanny valley’, formulated in 1970 by a Japanese robotics professor, Masahiro Mori, may be pertinent. This seeks to explain why human likeness in something that is not human prompts in us not the apparently logical emotional response of kinship and affinity, but more often a rather creepy feeling. Paradoxically, given that we react most negatively to wild creatures that look *least* like us (snakes, scorpions and spiders, for example), when something looks *rather* like a human being, but not quite, we still tend to respond negatively. This may be because, although we react favourably to the ‘human’ aspect of an owl’s appearance, when the bird then refuses to engage with us we feel somehow snubbed, which engenders hostility.

Interestingly, some eminent ornithologists have not always been convinced by the beauty, charisma and fascination of owls, as the Victorian naturalist William Yarrell admitted:

> The characters and appearance of Owls are so singular and so peculiar, that once having seen them they are not readily forgotten. They have but little external beauty of form. The head is large, the expression grotesque, the body bulky in appearance, the plumage soft and downy.

Either way, as Jeremy Mynott observes in *Birdscapes*, owls ‘present themselves to us with more associations than perhaps any other family of birds’. From Palaeolithic cave paintings to Pokémon characters, owls have always fascinated, captivated and terrified us, depending on the time, place and context. In the following chapters, I will delve into the lives, habits, behaviour and cultural connections of Britain’s seven species of owl – the tawny, barn, little, short-eared and long-eared, snowy, and eagle owls – before a final chapter on the world’s other species of owls, and my encounters with some of them during my global travels.

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