

Owls

Whether their call is a hoot or a whinny, owls are a fascinating group of birds with many special adaptations. Most, though not all, are hunters of the night. Nine species of owls have been reported in Nebraska. Of these, five have been sighted in the wild at the Nature Center.

All owls are meat eaters with sharp talons on their toes for capturing and carrying prey and strong curved beaks for tearing their food. Although their four toes have the normal bird arrangement of three pointing front and one back, owls can swing one toe back to make it easier to carry heavy loads.

An owl's feathers are quite soft and are fringed on the edge, a feature that makes nearly silent flight possible. The 'horns' of several owl species have nothing to do with hearing, they are tufts of feathers that contribute to successful camouflage. However, the facial feathers that add so much personality to an owl funnel sounds to the ears that are hidden beneath them. The owl's ears have flaps as a human's do, but unlike us, they can move these flaps to orient the ear toward sounds. And the ears are not symmetrically placed, making it possible to accurately pinpoint the location of a sound.



An owl's eyes are large for its size (a great horned owl's eyes are as large as a human's) and are set close together in the front of its head to provide excellent depth perception. The eyeballs are more tubular than rounded, allowing them to gather more light. And the retinas have more rod cells than cones. Rods are responsible for being able to perceive objects in dim light, while cones are responsible for sharpness of vision. Like cats, owls have a membrane in back of the retina that acts like a mirror bouncing light back for a second pass. An owl's eyes cannot move in their sockets as ours can, so it must move its whole head to look around. While it is not true that owls can rotate their head completely, they can turn their heads further than most creatures because they have extra neck bones. An owl has 14 vertebrae while a human has only 7. These extra bones make it possible for an owl to turn its head about 270 degrees (a full circle would be 360).



The Nature Center has six owls on exhibit, one great horned owl, two barred owls, two screech owls and a barn owl. All of them came to us from Raptor Recovery Nebraska and are non-releaseable. They have injured wings, were not able to fully recover from West Nile Virus, or have sustained a head injury. The barn owl, our most recent addition, was found 7 miles west of Elmwood in 2004, is essentially blind, and had a broken right wing. In caring for these permanently injured birds, the Nature Center gives the public a chance to observe them more closely than would be possible otherwise.