

(Gary P. Carter)



Strigidae the TRUE OWLS

People have been fascinated by owls since the beginning of recorded history. Owls were the subject of some of the earliest cave paintings known, drawn over 15,000 years ago. Owls have been the subject of ancient legend, a widely used symbol of wisdom, and they have also been feared by many as a harbinger of death. Owls feature prominently in many superstitions and tales of folklore in the old South.

There are 207 species of owls spread across the world on all continents except Antarctica. Owls come in a variety of cryptic colors and sizes ranging from smaller than a bluebird to larger than a vulture. Most, but not all, are nocturnal in nature. All are carnivorous, and they prey on a wide variety of animals from birds and rodents, to insects, frogs, snakes, fish, bats, skunks, and more.

Owl eyes are well adapted for hunting at night, and their ears are extremely sensitive. Many have ear tufts—which are not ears, but are actually tufts of feathers on top of their heads. The function of these tufts is unclear, but they may help with camouflage. Owls have powerful feet with sharp talons for catching prey and hooked bills for shredding flesh. Both their contour feathers and flight feathers have special modifications that help enable them to fly silently. Owls regurgitate “pellets” after feeding. These pellets consist of indigestible bones and fur. Close examination of owl pellets provides one easy method for determining their prey.

In the nineteenth century, owls were often considered as “pests” or “harmful species,” and they were actively hunted by man. Hunters felt owls killed too many game birds, and farmers believed they actively preyed on livestock. Both would shoot them on sight. One hunter, featured in *The Wilson Mirror* newspaper in March 1890, shared his opinion: “I seldom hunt quail or pheasants. I find just as much sport among the owls and hawks, besides a great deal more profit. Owls are always in demand by taxidermists and collectors and I have sold a single bird for \$20. A man would have to burn a good deal of powder to get \$20 in return for killing pheasants.” In 1893, Dr. A.K. Fisher published research documenting the importance of owls to farmers and agriculture and recommending their protection, but his national call went largely unheeded.

Owls were specifically excluded from early laws protecting other birds, including the 1903 Audubon law enacted in North Carolina and the subsequent law enacted in South Carolina. In fact, in many areas, cash bounties were offered for killing flying “vermin” which by definition included any hawk or owl. In 1908, Dr. J.B. Alexander of Mecklenburg County, shared this memory:

The hawks and owls that were formerly so plentiful as to be a pest to every family in the country, are exceedingly rare. I remember in 1859 that I frequently had to get up in the night to shoot at the owls to run them off, so that my family could sleep. I once saw five large owls fly from one pine tree in my yard. Now all is silent, and the brood of young chickens feed at will without the fear of hawks by day or owls by night.

It wasn't until the 1930s that some “beneficial hawks and owls” finally received legal protection leaving only three species, the Great Horned Owl, Cooper's Hawk, and Sharp-shinned Hawk, fully unprotected. However, shooting and trapping of most raptors continued. Today, all of our owls are afforded full legal protection at both the state and federal levels.

We have documented six species of “true” or “typical” owls here in the Central Carolinas. Three of these owls are residents that breed here. The other three are found only during migration or as winter visitors. One other owl found in this region is discussed in the Supplementary Bird List, and another is briefly discussed in the Hypothetical Bird List.