

Owls

By Cass Turnbull

I like owls, though I don't know why—I've never had more than a brief sighting of one. I like to imagine myself being out late some summer night, sitting on a rock or heading to a cabin in the woods, when I hear the unmistakable hooting of an owl. In the moonlight I can picture the owl perched on a nearby limb, its eyes fixed upon me, shining like a cat's eyes do. I get a little thrill thinking of a close encounter. When people like something, the feeling usually originates in the subconscious, an idea that was confirmed by an article in the New York Times, written by Alex Rosenberg and entitled "Why You Don't Know Your Own Mind." Many scientific studies show that we don't consciously know the reasons we make our decisions. One researcher wrote that the "conscious feeling of willing an act actually occurs after the brain process that brings about the act." In other words, we make up the reasons for our choice after the choice has been made—all the time. The reasons you give and believe to be true are, in fact, inaccurate. I guess we've all suspected this from time to time, though more often in others, rather than in ourselves.



For the past few weeks, in trying to tease out what exactly I like about owls and put it into words, I madly googled and Pinterested the subject. I discovered many interesting facts about owls and a few previously unrecognized reasons why I might like them. Owls are associated with other things for which I show an affinity—misty fall nights that are just a tad bit scary, woods, the moon, mystery. Owls are rare, or at least are rarely seen by people (especially a city girl like me), because they are active at night. Recently, when I saw a group of folks standing in the middle of a dark street at Magnuson Park, I had the smarts to stop and ask what had grabbed their attention. It was a pair of adolescent owls in a Deodar cedar tree. I even got to see one of them through their scope. When I asked a woman there why the owl was bobbing its head around, she said it was using triangulation to figure out where and what I was.

Along with their good eye sight, owls have great hearing, which they use to locate their prey at night. One ear is higher than the other on an owl's head to enhance triangulation. In this way, an owl can pick up and pinpoint the source of a noise.

They can hear a vole running in a tunnel under 18 inches of snow; they can hear a mouse squeak

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a half mile away; they can hear a beetle running through the grass 100 feet away. This allows them to hunt in total darkness when even they can't see. Most owls hunt at night or at dawn and dusk. Their eyesight is superior to humans, possibly as much as 30 to 100 times better. One reason their eyesight is so good is that their eyeballs are not round like ours. Instead, they are more tube or bell shaped and take up as much as half the space inside their skulls. Because the eye shape means they cannot rotate their eyes in their sockets, they swivel their heads instead. An owl can turn its head 270 degrees to look backwards without moving its body. That's more than halfway around.

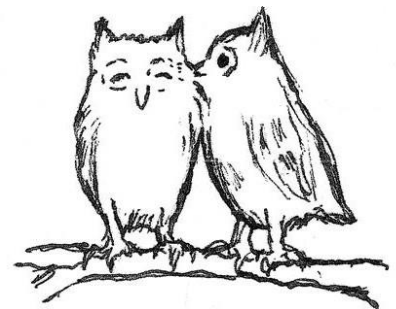


The intense eyes and swiveling head add to the mystique of the owl—Paul Newman meets the Exorcist girl! An owl can rotate its head top to bottom, too, and stare at you with its face upside down. How cool is that? Intensity is the common factor in all the owl photos I found on Pinterest. What eyes! Huge and always facing straight ahead, pointed at you, and really, really intense. No matter what emotion the owl's face shows—fear, curiosity, scorn, anger, wisdom, or, most often, just plain watchfulness—those eyes shoot back at you like a slew of arrows. You hardly ever see a happy, playful, casual, sweet, or relaxed look on an owl's face. I guess they are cute when they are fuzzy babies, called owlets, but, as you know, baby anything's are cute. God makes them that way so their parents

won't drown them early on for being so much trouble. Owls can also look cute when they are cuddling with their mates, which they seem to do a lot—very sweet. Sometimes an owl will make friends with a human or other animal.

You can easily find photos of owls palling around with a golden lab, a cat, a duckling, or a little girl, always with its eyes looking straight ahead, and pretty intensely at that, though very lovingly too, I'm sure. These birds can imprint on a different species when they are owlets, which owls do particularly easily. I once met a person who volunteers at a wildlife rehabilitation center where baby animals are kept in screened

cages so they don't imprint on the humans. They leave peepholes for the vets to check in on the animals. The baby animals get lonely so they pair them up in their cages or put something in with them to act as company. She told me owlets get a feather duster. Owls are solitary creatures and are hard to train, something that falconers will often interpret as a sign that owls are not very intelligent. You already know that's not true. Just look at their eyes! My cat can't be trained even though he's so smart that he has me trained to do his bidding. Because of their eyes and demeanor, owls have been associated with knowledge and wisdom.



In other cultures, they are seen as spiritual, even metaphysical beings. The numinous owl is thought to be the doorway to the deeper self and the bringer of psychic perception.

In India, the owl is associated with the sixth Chakra, which represents inner knowing and the path to spiritual clarity. Owls are frequently associated with death and misfortune. No wonder—since they are amazing killing machines. Besides their excellent hearing and sight, owls have special feathers that make their flight almost silent. They have sharp talons and a powerful grip. They are fearless and will hunt prey bigger than themselves. Great horned owls are reported to carry off foxes, herons, small deer, young wolves, and even golden eagles. At the top of their food chain, an owl's only known predator is a larger species of owl. In the Cameroon, the name for owl means 'the bird that makes you afraid.' The Mayan religious text speaks of owls as being messengers from the 'place of fright.'

Here at home we see owls depicted at Halloween, a time that celebrates ghosts, goblins, and ghouls. Another strange thing I've noticed in my research is that an owl won't actively hunt so much as wait for something to happen by in the dark, when it suddenly swoops down with its particularly silent wings to snatch its prey with its particularly powerful claws. Maybe this patient, watchful waiting has been the reason that owls are so frequently associated with misfortune and death. People my age feel watched already! Even so, I'd like the chance to meet up.