

## Owl Pellet Examination Instructions

**Warning:** This owl pellet has been heat sterilized to kill bacteria. However, we recommend that you still follow these safety guidelines:

**Never put owl pellets or parts of owl pellets in your mouth!**

Work in a place separate from eating and food preparation areas.

Use disposable gloves during the dissection and cleanup.

Use a disposable plate to contain the owl pellet during dissection.

Thoroughly wash hands, work areas, and any dissection tools when finished using a sanitizer. Household bleach in a 1:10 solution can be used.

An owl pellet is a good way to learn about the eating habits of *birds of prey*--birds that eat other animals. Owl pellets are the regurgitated remains of an owl's meal, including all the bones of the animals it ate. Owls usually swallow their food whole, digest the edible parts, and then expel the indigestible parts through their mouth as a pellet.

Inspect the outside of the pellet and note its size, whether there are fur or feathers, and whether there are any clues to where the pellet came from or how many animal skeletons the pellet contains.

Gently pull apart the pellet, being careful not to break any of the bones inside it. Use toothpicks or a teasing needle to separate the bones from the fur or feathers. Take special care when removing the skulls and jawbones, since they are the best way to identify the animals that the owl has eaten. Group similar bones together.

When you've finished sorting the bones, roll the last bits of fur between your fingers to find little bones or teeth that might have been overlooked. Once you've found all the bones, try to reconstruct the skeletons of the animals. Use an identification key to identify them.

How many different kinds of animals did you find in the pellet? How many animals were there total? What can you conclude about the eating habits of the owl that made your pellet?

A food chain shows the relationship between producers (plants) and consumers (animals that eat the plants or other animals). Here are some possible food chains involving the Barn owl:

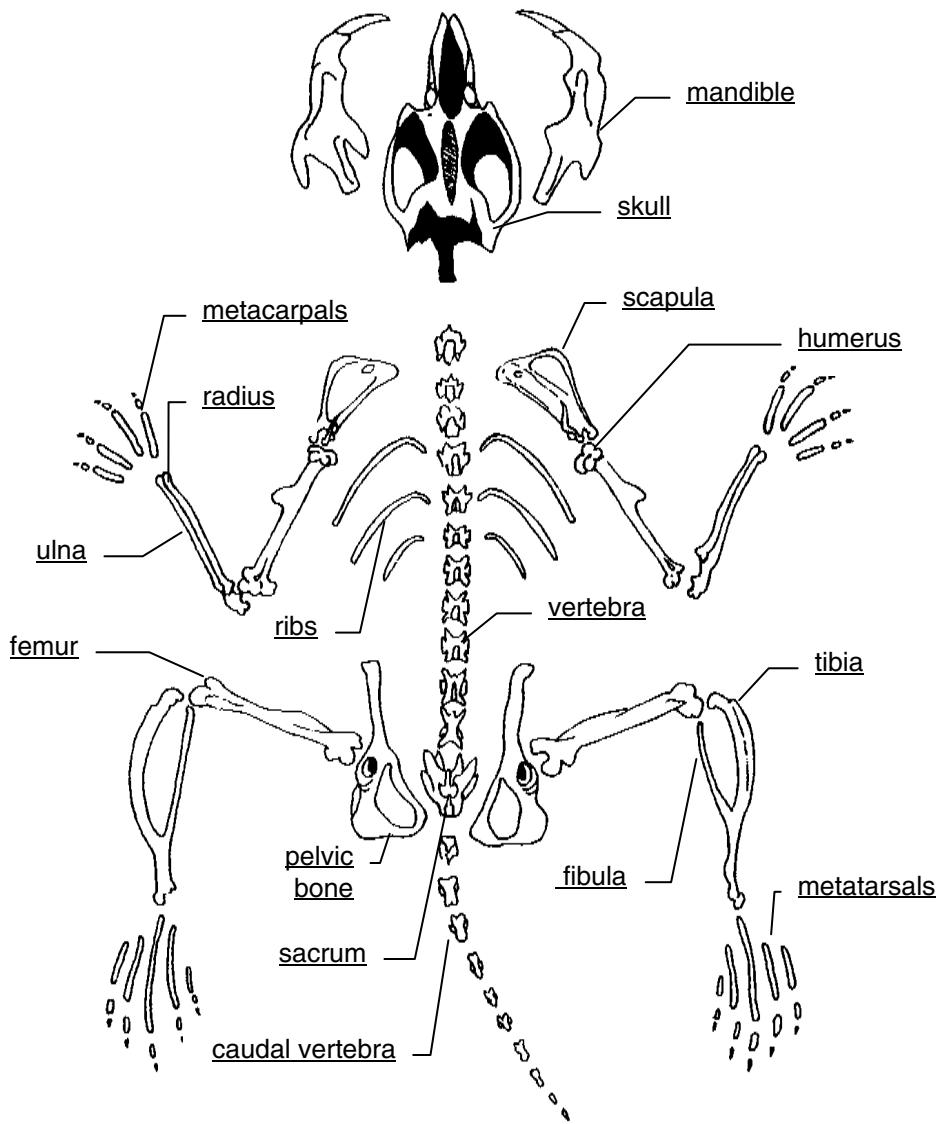
Plants, grasses, roots, seeds --> mice, rats, gophers, birds

Plants --> insects --> frogs, birds

Worms --> birds, moles

Birds, mice, rats, frogs --> weasels

Birds, mice, rats, gophers, frogs, moles, weasels --> Barn owls



**Rodent Skeleton**