

Owl Pellet Examination Instructions

An owl pellet examination is a good way to learn about the eating habits of *birds of prey*--birds that eat other animals and small birds. 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.

Carefully inspect the outside of the pellet and note its size, whether there are any feathers observable, and whether there are any clues to where the pellet came from. Have your children guess how many different 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.

As you dissect, look for evidence of the wool-eating moth: tiny eggs, pupae casings, cocoons, or larvae.

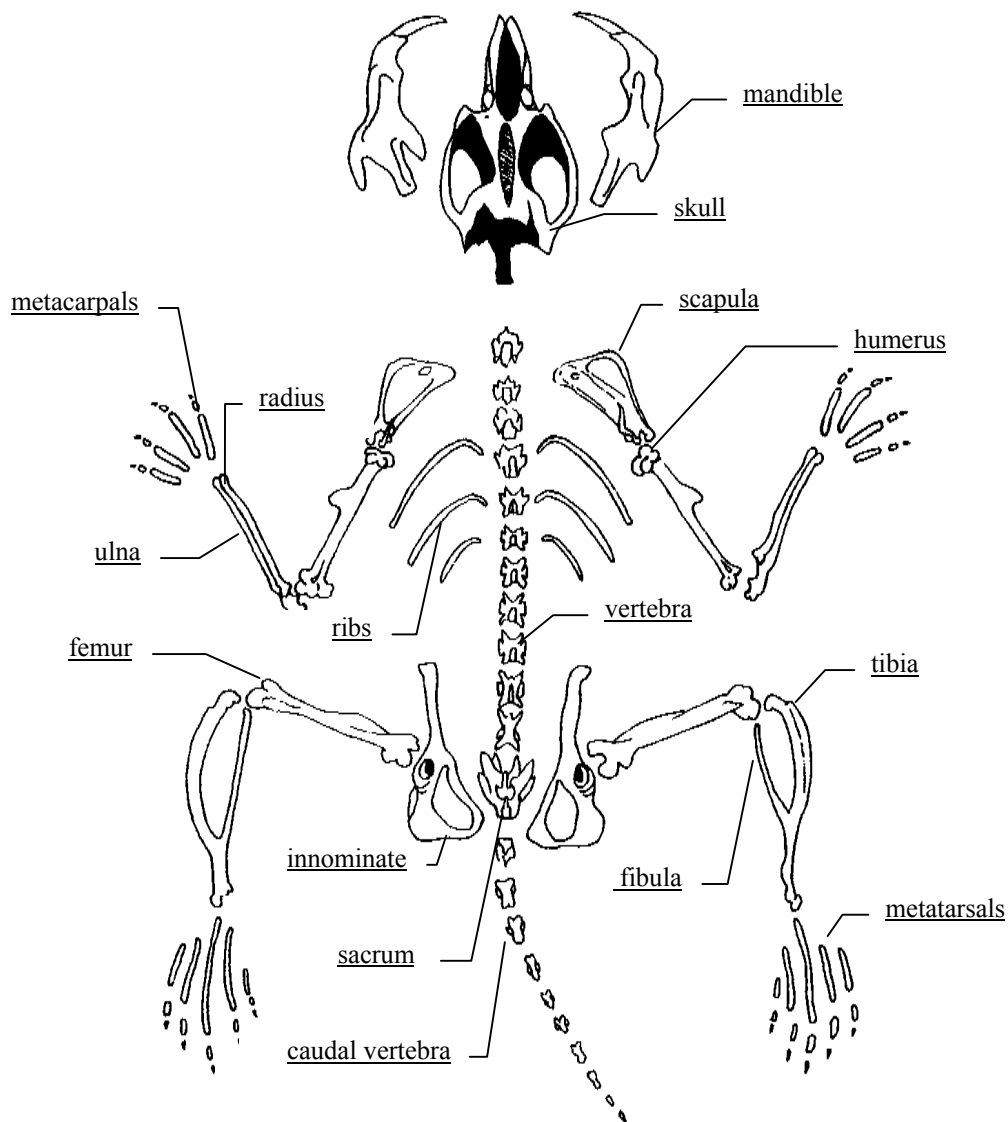
When you've finished sorting the bones, roll the last bits of fur between your fingers to find little bones or teeth that might have been overlooked. Once you've found all the bones, try to reconstruct the skeletons of the animals. Use an identification key to identify them.

How many different kinds of animals did you find in the pellet? How many animals were there in 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 that eat other animals). Here are some simple relationships between the producers and consumers that are involved in a Barn owl's diet:

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

Based on what animals you were able to identify in your owl pellet, make a chart of what you think the owl's food chain looked like.



Rodent Skeleton