

Studying Owl Pellets

Teacher Information

Owls are birds of prey. They eat a diet of rodents, birds, and, occasionally, large insects such as grasshoppers. Owls eat their prey whole but cannot digest the bones, fur, or hard insect parts. They collect these indigestible parts in their stomachs, and the stomach muscles form these parts into a ball which the owls eventually spit out. The ball (pellet) resembles a cat's fur ball. Owl pellets usually contain the bones from several meals of animals, as well as fur and, sometimes, feathers.

Discoveries

- The study of an owl pellet reveals the particular diet of an owl.
- The pellet may reveal the bones of specific mammals or birds.
- The pellet may reveal the remains of two or more prey.

Owl Pellet Information

1. Since owl pellets contain fur, they often become infested with wool-eating moths. Older pellets may contain clothing-moth larvae and pupae. The larvae and pupae can be destroyed by enclosing the pellets in a jar with a few moth balls. Commercially prepared owl pellets have been fumigated to destroy any stages of clothing moths.
2. Owl pellets should be handled without gloves because it is easier to locate the tiny bones. Always make certain you wash your hands after handling the pellets.

Materials

- owl pellets (see page 80)
- large plastic container
- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ pints (1 liter) water mixed with 2 tablespoons (30 mL) bleach
- plastic gloves
- tweezers
- paper towels
- Pellet Observation sheet (page 39)
- Bone Identification Key (page 40)
- Vole Skeleton Chart (page 41)

Owl Pellet Preparation

1. Place the owl pellets in the plastic container. Cover the pellets completely with the water-and-bleach solution. (It is suggested you wear plastic gloves for this process.) Soak the pellets for approximately one-half to one hour. Lift pellets out of the water with tweezers; allow them to dry on the paper towels.
2. Reproduce the Pellet Observation sheet, Bone Identification Key, and Vole Skeleton Chart, one per child.
3. Prepare the Bone Identification Key and Vole Skeleton Chart as an overhead transparency.
4. Each child or pair of children will need a small tray (a grocery store meat tray works well) containing the materials for all three lessons:
 - tweezers
 - softened owl pellet
 - magnifying glass
 - small plastic containers (empty film canisters work well)
 - toothpicks
 - dark-colored tagboard
 - white glue
 - paper towels
 - plastic wrap
5. Review the three lessons (pages 37–38). You may choose to do one or all of them with your children.