

Winter can be a hoot!

By: Jenny Lin



Winter traditions are a funny thing, and can look different for everyone. For some, this frosty season is all about giant cozy sweaters and steaming mugs of hot chocolate. Others might be found knee deep in fluffy snow, working on the biggest snowman the neighborhood has ever seen! For me, winter is all about trudging through the forest in the bitter cold with a dozen other people trying to be as quiet as possible. In the dark. Before anyone gets overly concerned, I should add that we are also taking breaks on this trek to play owl calls on a speaker. Admittedly, this extra tidbit may explain a lot for some folks but there are probably some people who are now more confused than ever. So let me explain - winter is owl prowl season!

Most animals out there are just trying to survive this harsh time of year, taking precautions with food caches or finding that perfectly sheltered overwintering spot. In fact, some animals decide that it's all too much and just leave for warmer weather! Owls can be a little bit different. Not only are these animals surviving the winter, but some owls are breeding in it¹! This is good news for owl enthusiasts such as yours truly, because it means that it gives us a better chance to encounter one of these mysterious birds out in nature - something that is usually quite hard to do.



This Barred Owl is having no problems hunting out in the cold and can be seen here swallowing a Meadow Vole. (Picture by Paul Tavares)

¹ Great Horned Owls are a common owl species that is tough enough to breed in the winter- talk about a superhero mom!

In Ontario, we have 11 different breeding species of owls² and all 11 out of 11 are camouflage experts. Of course, camouflage has its uses. The humble Meadow Vole may use camouflage to avoid the jaws of a hungry predator, while the crafty coyote may use it to sneak up on unsuspecting prey. An owl's camouflage can serve the same purposes, but it's not the main reason they have it. You see, the smaller species of owls will definitely depend on staying hidden to avoid predators, but those bigger species are apex predators³. There aren't many animals they need to avoid since there aren't many animals brave enough to want to tangle with their talons. Sneaking up on prey is a non-issue for many owls as well. Most of our native owls are active and hunting at night⁴, where colour doesn't play a big role in vision. These owls could be bright pink and still look mostly grey in the dark to its prey! All this is to say, owls have a very special reason for camouflage and that reason is to get a good day's sleep.



A Great Horned Owl, doing its best tree impression. (Photo by Chris Earley)

Owls are very unpopular in the forest, which makes sense when they can eat many of its residents. Often, small woodland creatures like blue jays, chickadees, and crows will take offense at an owl roosting in their tree for the day⁵ because it means that come nighttime, they may become a convenient snack. Therefore, something must be done. These songbirds will gather and take up the issue with the owl to drive it away! This seems like a bad idea at first because the owls are much more powerful but

² Feeling lucky yet? Because you should, that's a lot of owls!

³ We're looking at you, Great Horneds and Snowies

⁴ Northern Hawk Owls and Snowy Owls are diurnal and mostly active during the day though! How's that for busting myths?

⁵ The audacity!

worry not, those blue jays and crows have their own super power- they can be VERY annoying. Songbirds will often “mob” predators, which essentially involves getting together and screaming until the owl decides it can’t sleep and goes elsewhere. Thus, an owl’s camouflage allows it to hide from these pesky mobbers and get some shuteye. Of course, that means that they are also well hidden from owl-loving bird nerds trying to add more species to their life list.

All in all, owls are rarely encountered in the wild but there are a few good ways to possibly find some. One way is to listen for angry songbirds trying to mob something and going to see what they are agitated about. The other is to join an owl prow! An owl prow! is an event⁶ that aims to connect people with these fascinating creatures. First, an info section gets us well acquainted with the owls in our area and then, we trek out into the wilderness to see if we can call for some wild owls! Owls breeding in the winter, such as the Great Horned Owl, can be extra vocal during this season since they are full of hormones and motivated to respond, either to warn us out of their territory or to beckon us closer in case we are a potential mate. So the next time you start your winter traditions, think about mixing it up and adding an owl prow! to your repertoire for some nocturnal nature goodness!

⁶ Such as the ones hosted at The Arboretum! Check out <https://www.uoguelph.ca/arboretum/educationandevents/workshops> for more info!

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