

Be wise, take a perceptive look at an owl

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

I believe that owls are rather special birds.

They have a reputation for being wise and are frequently used in modern commercials to represent a figure of knowledge.

Beyond their symbolic nature, owls have distinctive physical characteristics.

For example, many owl species have ears that are not placed symmetrically on their head. Being offset allows the owl to find prey more easily using multiple sound orientations. It's like an enhanced stereo reception.

Owls also can't move their eyes, which provides them with astonishing depth perception. It also explains why owls evolved to be able to rotate their necks 270 degrees. Owls will also move their heads up and down as they swivel their heads. This allows the owl to "range find"



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.



The Northern Saw-whet Owl — what an adorable bird.

and determine a precise location for their prey.

If you have an opportunity to see an owl in the wild, take some time and study it. It is time well spent.

If you want to find an owl in nature, start by walking to a dense tree or group of trees and then look down. That's right, look at the ground under the tree. You're looking for signs of an owl, not the owl itself.

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They can, and do, find the deepest, darkest recesses of a tree in which to perch.

Owls will frequently perch in the depths of dense vegetation. They create a whitewash trail of poop over time. If your tree has an owl, you will see a collection of whitewash on the ground below the perching area.

When you find this, look up. You may be able to follow whitewash up through the limbs until you finally find the owl.

You will also see owl "pellets" on the ground. They don't digest all the bones and parts of their prey. Owls will concentrate the debris into a mass and then regurgitate it.

It is a common grade-school exercise to dissect a pellet to

find all the micro bits of non-digested prey. One pellet can produce a large collection of very small bones.

Northern Saw-whet Owls are quickly placed into the category of "adorable bird."

There's something about their yellow eyes, white eyebrows against a brown facial mask, and their white spots. They are small (5-9 inches, tip to tail) — about the size of a man's fist or a mango.

They can, and do, find the deepest, darkest recesses of a tree in which to perch. Even with a good whitewash trail to the perch, these small owls can be hard to find.

That's not a bad thing, really. Survival is key. Habitat and food availability are critical for these small birds and others.

I've found them at roadside rest stops and in various parks around Washington and Oregon.

I'm sure people wonder about the man who is randomly wandering about the park, looking at the ground and then craning his head to look up. He'll make small movements to refine his view.

Sometimes he'll shake his head and wander on to another tree. A few times he'll stop and stare up for an extended time. In this case he usually brings his camera up to take a photo. I'm sure some think I'm nuts.

Winter is a great time to find them. If you find yourself in a local park, a rest stop along your way to somewhere or out for a forest hike, look down at the base of trees for the concentrated whitewash and pellet collection. Then you can join me in the fun of following the trail up to see a Northern Saw-whet Owl. You'll be happy you did.

Don't forget your camera and binoculars. Good luck.