

Young owls don't give a hoot sometimes

Come wintertime the home herd of horses gets hayed late.. Heck, when temperatures are dropping, wouldn't you want something to keep your metabolism up to speed - although sometimes willpower and the bruising reality of three-to-five layers fight for noble intentions when mercury seriously slides! So, about now the haying gets later, sometimes even past midnight time.

And, as that's happened, in cool velvet darkness, there's been a new bird recently, glimpsed around the century old barn, sometimes if the moon's just right on shadow casting, atop electricity poles.

And, melodically calling, a soft kind of chirruping, 'cheer-up, cheer-up.'

Well, it turns out it's a young horned owl from this year's nesting, with the fierce 'ears' still 'growing' and whose voice will change into distinctive hoots around January or February time (and no more cheer-ups, a shame as they fit perfectly into still night mysterious landscapes).

Further up the Western Wood have been a pair of great grey horned owls, identified by another ornithological expert Peter Sherrington who cheerfully reproducing their



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Listening to the Land

calls for me to verify with deadly accuracy..

They're ferocious hunters, aided by unique filaments in the feathers that almost hook into each other. Thus, flight is soundless, their hearing especially acute, easily swooping onto snow covered voles located from a hundred metres away -and why they're one of the few predators audacious enough, capable of, piling into striped skunks who never have time to think about spraying even.

Owls swallow small prey (mice and voles) whole. Larger prey is torn into smaller pieces before being swallowed and into their stomach which has two chambers - one's a glandular number juicing digestive enzymes, acids and mucus together. (Because the acids are weak, only the soft tissues are digested.)

The second stomach is a muscular chamber, or gizzard, acting as a filter holding back bones, fur, teeth and feathers that are difficult to digest.

The soft parts of the food are ground by the gizzard's muscular contractions, and allowed to pass through to the rest of the digestive system.

Several hours after an owl has eaten, these indigestible parts remaining in the gizzard are compressed into a pellet the same shape as the gizzard.

The pellet can stay inside the owl's digestive system - before being regurgitated! And, because a stored pellet partially blocks the owl's digestive system, new prey cannot be swallowed until the pellet is ejected - and which you'll find beneath favourite roosting places (spruce is much preferred).

Owl prey, caught in fiercely strong talons, includes much favoured snowshoe hares too, tree squirrels, chipmunks, bats, frogs, insects even and sometimes waterfowl - all the remains to pellet-sleuth through if walking through old growth forest in particular.

Often they'll avail themselves of a ready



DUANE STARR PHOTOGRAPHY

An enchanting study of a young great horned owl.

made nest, frequently red-tailed hawks (who are sensibly down south) late in winter or very early springtime.

Owl parents are super protective - unknowing I walked once beneath one and had my ear clipped, the grey ghost that close - my! I legged out of that location at top speed.