



## Whose Hoo along the Lamprey River

by Suzanne Petersen

The Lamprey River has four species of owls that are regularly seen: barred, eastern screech, great horned, and northern saw-whet. Other owls, such as the snowy owl or the great gray owl, are occasional visitors. Worldwide, owls comprise 209 species.



barred owl  
length: 16-25 inches  
[http://www.nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/images/barred-owl\\_1.jpg](http://www.nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/images/barred-owl_1.jpg)



eastern screech owl  
length: 7-9 inches  
[http://www.nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/images/eastern-screech-owl\\_1.jpg](http://www.nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/images/eastern-screech-owl_1.jpg)



great horned owl  
length: 18-25 inches  
[http://www.nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/images/great-horned-owl\\_1.jpg](http://www.nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/images/great-horned-owl_1.jpg)



northern saw-whet owl  
length: 6-9 inches  
[http://www.nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/images/northern-saw-whet-owl\\_1.jpg](http://www.nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/images/northern-saw-whet-owl_1.jpg)

Who are these common but sometimes unfamiliar birds? Many people know that owls are predators that hunt mostly in the low light between dusk and dawn, taking rodents, amphibians, birds, and sometimes insects. They have excellent, binocular vision and lop-sided ears that help them pinpoint the exact location of prey. They fly silently with soft-edged feathers that absorb sound. They often swallow their food whole, digesting and absorbing the soft parts then regurgitating fur, feathers, and bones as a “pellet.” They have the ability to turn their heads far beyond their shoulder.

And from the “truth is stranger than fiction” department, here are some tidbits that are less well-known:

- Owl eyes are not round and they do not move in the eye socket; they are fixed in place. Owl eyes are pear-shaped, with the narrow end facing out. The wider end forms the retina in the back of the eye, giving the owl an enhanced ability to see in dim light.
- Despite their big eyes, owls are not strictly nocturnal. They can see in the daytime. Unlike human pupils, owl pupils do not shrink in response to bright light. To block out the extra light, owls lower their eyelids half-way or more. This can make them look sleepy even though they are wide awake.
- Owls have 14 vertebrae in their skinny necks. The neck only appears thick because of the fluffy feathers. The neck allows the owl to move its head in almost any direction to see better, whether to see 270° side-to-side or to get a better view of something straight ahead.
- Tufts on the heads of owls are not ears or horns. All owls have simple, flat ears that are hidden beneath the feathers located behind the eyes.
- Because their faces are flat, owls in flight often appear to be headless.
- Most owls make a variety of calls. They screech, hiss, and scream. Hoot calls usually mark territory, but not all owls hoot.
- Owl wings are bigger than wings of other birds of the same size. This extra wing size reduces the number of beats needed to fly and helps to make flight silent.
- Of the four species of owls found along the Lamprey, all are year-round residents except for the northern saw-whet owl.
- Owls do not make their own nests; they use tree cavities or abandoned crow or hawk nests.
- Owls are usually solitary, but a group of owls is called a parliament.

If you are out for a walk in the woods at between dusk and dawn, listen for owls or watch as they silently swoop through the trees. For every owl that you see, know that there are many more owls keeping an eye on you.

