

THE BIG WORLD OF SMALL OWLS

Lesson developed by: Pat Rossi, Summit County Master Gardener Volunteer

Introduction:

This activity will discuss a few owl species that are small by nature (small as adults). Four owl species will be covered: elf owl, northern saw-whet owl, eastern screech owl, and boreal owl.

Size of Owls:

(Sizes of owls taken from *Birding World* article and Lawrence, Long, and Angell books; see *Resources*) The Great Horned Owl, one of the largest owls, is 18-25 inches in length. In contrast, the Elf Owl is the smallest owl in the world at 5-6 inches in length. The Northern Saw-whet Owl, the smallest in Ohio, is 6 ½-8 inches in length. The Eastern Screech Owl, the most common owl in Ohio, is 7-10 inches long, and the Boreal Owl is 8 ½-12 ½ inches in length.



Great Horned Owl, Photo by Tom Koerner, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services

Four Small Owls:

❖ The **Northern Saw-whet Owl** lives in the Northern United States, Southern Canada, Alaska, Western United States to Mexico. It is the smallest owl in Eastern North America (see Long). It has a square head and is a cousin to the Boreal Owl, has yellow eyes, no ear tufts, is nocturnal, lives in cavities of trees and also nest boxes, hunts in woods and over fields, its legs and feet are feathered, and it has a sound like a saw being sharpened.



Northern Saw-whet Owl, Courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation

❖ The **Elf Owl** lives in the southwest United States, southeast and Baja California, and northern and central Mexico. It has yellow eyes, whitish eyebrows, and no ear tufts. It is nocturnal and migratory, eats insects, and nests in holes made by woodpeckers in saguaro cacti and trees.



Elf Owl, Courtesy of the artist, Mimi Hoppe Wolf, and the Texas Breeding Bird Atlas project, Texas A&M University, College Station

❖ The **Eastern Screech Owl** lives in southern and southeast Canada, the United States, and into Mexico. It is the most common owl in Ohio (see McCormac). It has yellow eyes, ear tufts, and black eyebrows. It is nocturnal, mates for life, lives in forests and urban/suburban areas. It nests in cavities of trees and also nest boxes, has a whinny (horse-like) sound, and can be either grey/brown or red (dimorphism) depending on where it lives (see Long, Sparks, Lawrence).



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Eastern Screech Owl, Blink at Quail Hollow State Park, photo by Jerry Salisbury, Summit County Master Gardener Volunteer

- ❖ The **Boreal Owl** is named after the boreal forests in North American and Eurasia (boreal meaning northern), e.g. the conifer forests of Canada. It has a square head like its cousin the Northern Saw-whet Owl. It has yellow eyes and is migratory to Northern United States if the winter is severe in Canada. This owl nests in trees and nest boxes. The owl will freeze prey and when food is needed will thaw the prey with its feathers (see Lawrence). It will also plunge into snow to get prey and mostly eats voles (see Long and Taylor).



Boreal Owl, Holger Teichmann/MacCauley Library at Cornell Lab of Ornithology (ML204196191)

Activity 1- Questions

1. What two owls are cousins?
2. What color are the eyes of all four owls?
3. What owl can be either grayish/brown or reddish?
4. What owl lives in conifer trees in forests in Canada?

5. What owl has a call that sounds like a horse?
6. Of the four owls, what owl has ear tufts?
7. What owl freezes its prey and then thaws it with its feathers?
8. What owl can live in a cactus hole? How is the hole made?
9. What owl is the smallest in the world? What owl is the smallest in Eastern North America?
10. What owl do you like the most?

Activity 2 –

1. Draw and color a cactus and cut out one of the photos of the owl that would live in that nest and place it in your drawing.
2. Draw a picture of a pine tree and place one of the photos of an owl in your drawing.

References are attached

Contact information:

If you have any questions about this activity, please email mgsummitcounty@gmail.com.

We hope you benefitted from this activity. Please let us know if you utilized this with a quick email to the above address. Please send your name, facility name, number of participants involved in this activity, and your feedback for improvement so we can measure our impact and improve this product. Thank you!