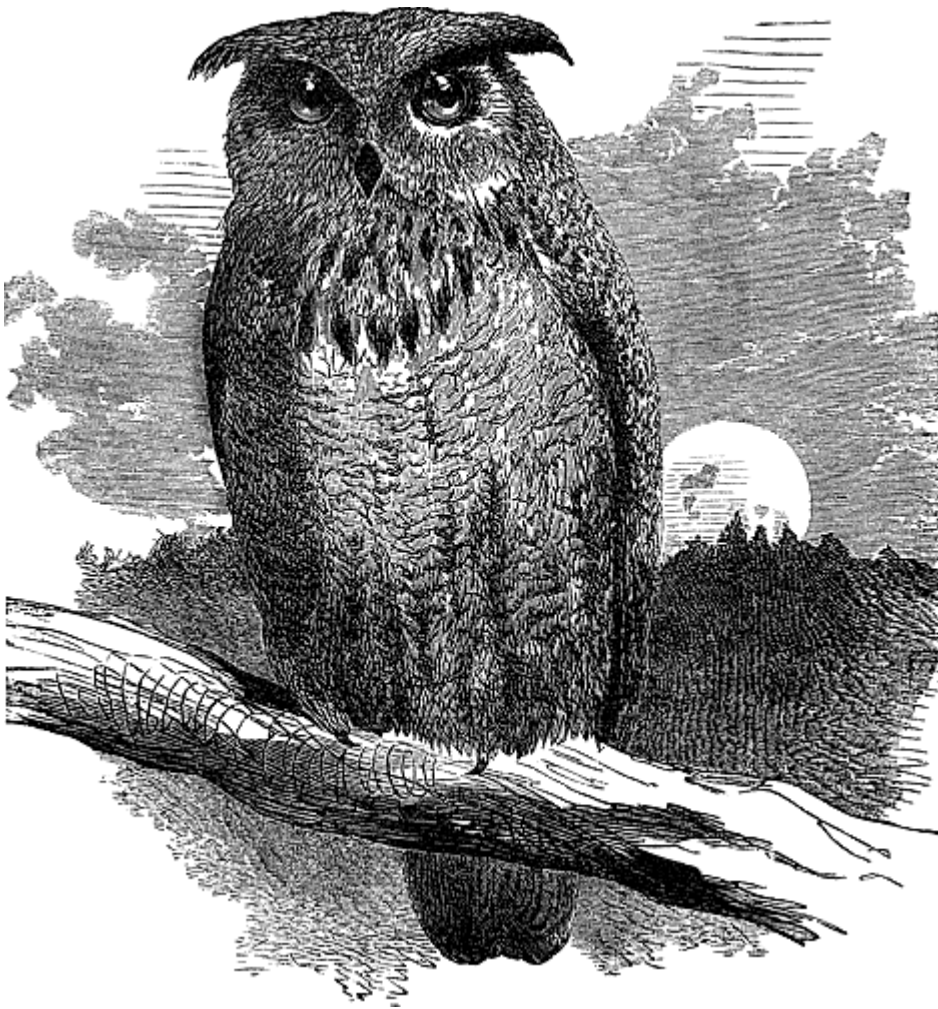


The Owl

by Mary Elizabeth Southwell

This solemn looking bird is seldom to be seen by day. It is strictly a night bird. Its eyes are unable to endure the glare of sunshine, but are formed for seeing in the dim twilight, or in the soft radiance of the moon. There are at least eighty different species of owls. This picture resembles most nearly the Virginian Eagle Owl, an American bird. Our common barn-door owl has no tufts on its head. Some people are foolish and cruel enough to persecute owls, under the plea that they do mischief, destroy pigeon's eggs, etc. But this is a false charge. On the contrary they are very actively useful creatures, and the humane naturalist, Mr. Waterton, says that "if this useful bird caught his food by day instead of hunting it by night, mankind would have ocular demonstration of its utility in thinning the country of mice, and it would be protected and encouraged everywhere. It would be with us what the ibis was with the Egyptians." The ibis is a bird that was found so useful in destroying locusts and serpents in Egypt, that in olden times it was made a capital crime for any one to destroy it. Nay, the idolatrous Egyptians went further, and not only paid divine honours to this bird, worshipping it as a deity whilst alive, but embalmed its body after death, and preserved it in the form of a mummy. You may see many ibis mummies in the Egyptian rooms of the British Museum. Through God's goodness there is no danger of our going quite so far as the Egyptians even if we did do justice to the poor abused owl, and it is very much to be wished that people would learn to see its valuable qualities. There is no doubt owls are amongst the creatures given to us by God to do us real service in keeping down the increase of smaller animals, that would otherwise soon over-run and destroy our food. But as Mr. Waterton elsewhere says, prejudices are hard to overcome, and I suppose the poor owl will be hunted and killed, whenever he is to be found by the ignorant, to the end of the chapter. Some idea may be formed of the rapid clearance an owl would make of vermin from a barn, from the fact that, when he has young, he will bring a mouse to the nest every twelve or fifteen minutes. Mr. Waterton saw his barn owl fly off with a rat he had just shot. And at another time she plunged into the water and brought up in her claws a fish, which she carried away to her nest. The Barn Owl is white, and does not hoot, at least by many this is thought to be the case. The Brown Owl is the hooting or screech owl, and makes a very dismal noise.



THE OWL.

The owl can do without drinking for a very long time. Mr. White, of Selborne, says he knew a Brown Owl to live a whole year without water. The owl swallows its prey whole when small, and afterwards brings up from its crop the fur, bones, and other parts that cannot easily be digested, in the form of a round cake. Hawks are said to do the same thing.

The great Virginian Owl is of an immense size, and its cry is said to be very terrible when heard in the lonely American forests, resembling at times the last struggling scream of a person being throttled. Owls will eat raw meat, but their favourite food consists in young mice, and they may often be seen at twilight, hunting like sporting dogs round the meadow paths for field-mice which come out at that hour, and going back every five minutes or so to their nests, to see that all is well at home.

If by chance an owl appears in daylight, he is immediately attacked by all the smaller birds, who know their enemy, and feel pleasure in insulting him when he cannot revenge himself. For the owl grows so confused if he lingers abroad till the sun has risen, that he cannot find his way back to his nest, nor make head against his pursuers, as he would soon do in the dim twilight. Bird fanciers have been known to take advantage of this circumstance in Italy, and tying an owl to a tree in daylight, they lime all the surrounding branches. Troops of little birds soon find out their helpless foe, and hurrying to attack him with their little beaks and claws, they perch on the limed twigs, and are taken by scores.

The Snowy Owl inhabits the north of Europe, but is sometimes seen in more southern regions.

It pursues hares, of which it is particularly fond, and often snatches fish from the water, over which it slowly sails, with a sudden grasp of its foot. It often also accompanies sportsmen, that it may share in the sport. In winter, when this owl is fat, the Indians esteem the Snowy owl to be good eating. Its flesh is delicately white.

Source:

Southwell, Mary Elizabeth. "The Owl". *Mamma's Stories about Birds*. London: Darton and Co. 56 – 63. Electronic.