

Barn Owl Pellets

What the heck is a barn owl pellet?

Barn Owls usually swallow their prey whole, and their food passes into their gizzard. The gizzard is an organ that uses digestive fluid and bits of sand and gravel to grind and dissolve digestible material. Soft tissue, such as muscle, fat, and internal organs are easily processed, but the digestive acids of owls are too weak to dissolve tougher material, such as bones, fur, feathers, teeth, and claws. The gizzard compacts these leftovers into a tight pellet that the owl regurgitates.

[PELLET FORMATION ANIMATION](#)

(Carolina Biological - www.carolina.com)



Yuck, that's gross! I'm not touching that!!

Believe it or not, barn owl pellets are an exceptionally popular educational tool. School kids across the country, including those here in Palm Beach County, FL, routinely dissect pellets and examine their contents. Initial squeamishness is soon replaced by scientific curiosity and excitement. This activity often is incorporated into units on owl ecology, predator/prey relationships, and anatomy.

[VIRTUAL OWL PELLET DISSECTION](#)

(Kid Wings - www.kidwings.com)

CSI: Barn Owl



Rodent skulls: 2 Roof Rats (top), Cotton Rat (left), House Mouse (left center)

Because Barn Owls swallow their prey whole, the entire skeletons of last night's dinner often can be recovered from pellets and then reassembled. Specific prey items can be identified by examining the shape and form of the bones. By identifying the contents of many pellets, the general dietary preferences of barn owls can be determined.

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