



Dissecting Owl Pellets

What are pellets?

Pellets are small, oval-shaped objects, containing the undigested parts of the birds' food which are ejected through the mouth.

Pellets do not pass through the intestine of birds and are quite different from droppings. They do not smell, and are not unpleasant to work with.

They consist of things like bones, teeth, claws, beaks, insect parts, and seed husks. These are usually enclosed by softer material like fur, feathers, and vegetable fibre.

Why study pellets?

- We can identify precisely what the bird has been feeding on.
- We can get clues to the owl's hunting habits from the prey it has taken.
- We can estimate the numbers of different kinds of prey it takes.
- If we find out more about the prey animals, we learn a great deal about food chains and the exact part the owl plays in them.
- We can get a great deal of information about the different small mammals and where they are found.

How are pellets produced?

An owl will often swallow its prey whole. If it is too large to swallow, it can be pulled apart with the strong, hooked beak.

Once the food is swallowed, it passes first down to the gizzard, where the food is broken up, and then on to the stomach for digestion. Some of the harder parts of the prey are not, or only partly, digested.

These solid remains are prevented from passing any further down the gut. Instead, they are squeezed in the gizzard into a compact mass. This is then coughed up, or regurgitated, as the pellet. Owls normally produce 1-2 pellets every 24 hours.



Which birds produce pellets?

Most birds produce pellets. The more indigestible material there is in the food, the more pellets are produced. The best known birds that produce pellets are owls.

Where did these pellets come from?

While at the Medicine River Wildlife Centre, the injured and orphaned owls in our care continue to produce pellets after their meals. These pellets are gathered, dried, wrapped, and sterilized. Most of the bones found in these pellets will belong to ground squirrels and pocket gophers as that is mainly what they are fed.

How to dissect your pellets:

1. Pellets can be teased apart when they are dry, but it is best to soak them first. Half fill a bowl with water. Place the pellets in the bowl. Soak them for about half an hour, until they sink. Take them out and blot any excess water.
2. Tease each pellet apart very carefully using tweezers. Search carefully as you go so that nothing is missed.
3. As you find any bones or other items, remove them from the pellet. Clean them up and place them on some newspaper or paper towel to dry.
4. As you search, take note of the basic material of the pellet. Is it mainly fur or feathers, or something else? It will give you a good idea of what to expect.
5. Use the charts on the back of this sheet to assist in identifying what the owl ate.



Bone Chart & Rodent Skeleton

	Rodent	Shrew	Mole	Bird
Skull				
Jaw				
Scapula				
Forelimb				
Hindlimb				
Pelvic Bone				
Rib				
Vertebrae				

