

# An Evening with Owls at the Stage Nature Center

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Early spring is a special time to see and hear owls. Owls nest early in the year and by March the owls are incubating eggs. Southeast Michigan is a good place to see several species of Michigan's owls. Oakland Owlets families and friends gathered at the Stage Nature Center in Troy on March 24<sup>th</sup> for "An Evening with the Owls". The Stage Nature Center houses five owls that are unable to survive in the wild. These owls are education ambassadors for the Nature Center. The Oakland Owlets scheduled a special program with naturalist Christina Funk. Christina is also the primary owl caretaker. She has a special relationship with the owls, and some even recognize her voice.

The group met in the parking lot to check in before meeting Christina inside the Nature Center. There was a short time to explore the exhibits before the presentation. Stage Nature Center has native animals in aquariums along with beautiful rock and mineral displays. In addition, there is an area to watch local birds at their feeders. Megan and Stacey discovered a Whitetail deer dining at the bird feeders.



Christina invited everyone into the classroom to learn about Michigan owls. Using biological artifacts, also known as biofacts, including talons, skulls and feathers, Christina shared some of the superpowers that owls possess. Comparing owl feathers to Turkey

Vulture feathers, Christina explained that owl feathers have a fringes and comb like structures along the edges of their flight feathers. These features reduce turbulence and sound which contribute to the owl's silent flight. This adaptation gives owls an advantage to overtake prey by surprise. In addition, owl talons are strong and arranged so owls can grasp food. Using talons as weapons, owls can apply pressure to break the backs of their prey. Christina noted that Great Horned owls can apply 500 psi pressure. GH Owls are often known as the "Tiger of the Woods" because they can consume larger prey like skunks.



Christina passed each biofact to the participants to examine. One striking feature of owls is their eyes. Owl eyes are large and critical for hunting. Using the skull of a GH owl, Christina showed the special bony sockets, known as "**sclerotic rings**", that hold the eyes in place. Sclerotic rings prevent the movement of the owl's eyes. Owls watch objects by moving their heads. It may appear that owls are moving their heads in a complete circle, but instead the range of motion is 270 degrees. Extra vertebrae in their necks allow this rotation. Christina recruited a volunteer from the audience to demonstrate this adaptation. The large



eyes of an owl can be a hinderance in looking side to side, but owls have extraordinary methods to compensate. Owls have keen eyesight even in low light.

Owls swallow prey whole without chewing. Prey includes bones, fur, feathers and so forth. Christina explained the prey is digested in the owl's crop. Any the undigested food is then regurgitated in the form of **pellets**. Owl pellets can be dissected to examine an owl's diet. Sometimes the entire skeletons of mice, rats, voles, and squirrels can be reconstructed. Christina showed examples of the contents of owl pellets which include bones and fur of prey. Christina noted that owls consume many rodents and are important in controlling rats and mice. Rodenticide, a poison used to control rats, can kill owls if they eat the poisoned rodents.



After looking at owl adaptations, the group met one of the owl ambassadors. Christina introduced us to Mortimer, a gray phase **Eastern Screech owl**. Christina held Mortimer on a tether and took him around the room so everyone could see him closely. Mortimer injured his eye when he was young and could not survive in the wild. Mortimer sat very still on Christina's hand as she shared details about Eastern Screech owls. Christina played the calls of the Eastern Screech Owl. Everyone was silent and respectful. After seeing Mortimer, everyone prepared to go outdoors to the owl houses behind the Nature Center.

The group left the Nature Center and walked a short distance to the owl cages. The group huddled outside the owl closures in the darkness. Christina returned Mortimer to his closure and prepared to show another owl. Christina returned to the group with Sam the **Barred Owl**. Christina said Sam was found as a juvenile owlet and has imprinted on people. Sam relates more to people than other owls. Sam knows her voice and will communicate with Christina when she is nearby.



Sam called so everyone could hear the Barred owl's distinctive calls. The mnemonics sounds like "*Who Cooks for you, you all.*" Christina took Sam around so we could all see her. Christina gave all the owls in the closures rats and mice for dinner including Autumn the Great Horned Owl. The group was able to watch the owls swallow their prey whole. It was dark and hard to see, yet one young birder had night vision binoculars.

It was late and the walk to see owls along the trail was canceled due to the time. It was an amazing presentation, and everyone thanked Christina for her time and expertise. The group dispersed but were invited for snacks in the parking lot to take home.

The Stage Nature Center is supported by a non-profit, the Troy Nature Society. The Society is supported by membership and donations. There is a special fund for the owls that accepts donations for their care. Visit this link to learn more - [Support Our Owls – Stage Nature Center \(troynaturesociety.org\)](https://troynaturesociety.org)

**Photo Credits;** Kathleen Dougherty and Nathan Stouffer.