Carolina Quick Tips®

Carolina Owl Pellet Dissection

Owls swallow their prey whole or in chunks and regurgitate pellets of undigested material, including bones and fur. Owl pellet dissection allows students to investigate and identify bones, compare and sort the skeletons of prey, and learn about the characteristics and habits of owls. This is an excellent introductory-level dissection activity to reinforce basic science process skills. The activity supports 3-dimensional learning and builds toward the following:

- NGSS Scientific and Engineering Practices: Analyzing and Interpreting Data; Constructing Explanations
- NGSS Core Idea: Life Science 2: Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics

Materials Required

Large Owl Pellet (227880)
Dual Plastic Magnifier, 3× and 6× (602276)
Economy Dissecting Forceps, Plastic (623990)
Cardboard Tray or Paper Plate
Wooden Probes

Safety

Owl pellets are heat sterilized and completely safe. Nevertheless, be sure that students wash their hands and clean their work areas after handling the owl pellets.

Activity Procedure

1. Place an owl pellet on a cardboard tray or paper plate and obtain 2 wooden probes, a magnifying lens, and plastic forceps.
2. Unwrap the owl pellet carefully. Observe the color, size, and texture of the pellet.
3. Using the wooden probes and dissecting forceps, carefully separate the bones from the fur. The bones are brittle, so go slowly and work carefully to avoid breaking any bones.
4. Categorize and identify the bones found in the pellet. Use a sorting chart to identify each bone and, if possible, identify the animal from which it came. Skulls, jawbones, pelvic bones, vertebrae, and ribs are often recognizable. Common prey include small birds, mice, moles, and shrews.
5. Record your data and discuss your findings.

Results/Summary

After classifying and sorting bones, students gain insight into owl feeding habits and food webs. Students can compare the bones found in the pellets to human bones and discuss anatomical similarities and differences.

Additional Information

View more information, content links, and products related to this activity at www.carolina.com/takeaways.

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