

## LESSON 12

## Bird Diets

TEACHING TIME:  
Eating Like a Bird

**The Bible uses many kinds of birds to teach us things about ourselves.**

*“But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”*  
(Isaiah 40:31)

Has anyone ever said that you eat like a bird? Did you wonder what they really meant? When people use that phrase, they are usually meaning that someone does not eat very much. In truth, eating like a bird would depend on the type of bird. Just as bird feathers, wing design, and size vary from bird to bird, so does diet.

**Birdseed and a Lot More!**

Have you ever fed birds from your yard? Did you put out birdseed? If you did, you may have noticed that birds such as robins, blue jays, and mockingbirds turned up. They are songbirds or perching birds, and they eat seeds. These are not the only seed lovers. Certainly, these are some of them, though. (Squirrels are seed lovers, too!) These birds do not eat only seeds, however—insects are also a favorite part of their diet. I’m sure you’ve also noticed that many of these birds feed worms to their babies. With a diet of seeds, worms, and insects, would you classify them as herbivores, carnivores, or omnivores?

There are many birds that feed primarily on fish. Eagles are one of them. Wading birds, also, are often fish eaters, and it should not surprise you that diving birds, such as pelicans, are, too. Some wading birds also eat frogs and shrimp.

**Other Diet Favorites**

Birds of prey often eat mice and other rodents. They also eat fish and insects. You can see they are basically carnivores. Most birds of prey hunt during the daylight hours.

Owls differ from other birds of prey in that they are primarily active at night. This is called **nocturnal**. Owls feed on living animals, from insects to rodents. The size of the owl determines the size of prey that can be handled. Bigger owls eat bigger prey. Owls usually eat their food whole. The parts that cannot be digested, like bones and feathers, are formed into a ball called a **pellet**. These pellets are then coughed up, basically. By dissecting a pellet, you can see exactly what the bird ate.

Plants are a favorite of some of the running birds. These birds include ostriches and emus. Birds such as pigeons and doves enjoy fruits and seeds. Hummingbirds feed on nectar and insects.

As you can see, eating like a bird can mean many things. Fortunately for the birds, God designed each of them with the bills and claws that they need for finding, catching, and eating food. Birds of prey have their hooked beaks, specially made for tearing meat from bones, while flamingos have a strainer of sorts in their mouths that lets the water out and leaves the food in. Hummingbirds were created with long, narrow bills that can reach deep into flowers for nectar. Flying backward helps them get out again. Having read all of this, I'm sure you'll think twice when someone says that you eat like a bird!



### **HANDS-ON TIME: Dissect an Owl Pellet**

**Objective:** To learn more about owl diets and digestion.

(First to third graders may have difficulty with this experiment, therefore an alternate activity is provided for them below.)

*Note:* Owl pellets can be ordered from many different companies. I ordered mine from [www.sciencestuff.com](http://www.sciencestuff.com).

#### **Materials**

- Owl pellet
- Old newspapers
- Small jar
- Dishwashing liquid (hand, not dishwasher)
- Strainer, coffee filter, or paper towels
- Dissection kit or tweezers and toothpicks
- Black paper, poster board (if desired)
- Camera!

#### **Method**

1. Read the booklet that accompanies your owl pellet.
2. Gather all necessary supplies and prepare your work area. Cover your work surface with newspapers before beginning.
3. Fill a small jar with water and add a few drops of hand dishwashing liquid. Soaking your pellet is not necessary, but it does make the dissection easier.
4. Add your pellet to the jar, gently shaking it. This will help break your pellet apart.
5. Using a strainer lined with a coffee filter or a couple of paper towels, carefully pour the contents of your jar into the sink or yard. BEWARE: You will basically have a lot of wet animal fur or bird feathers. Be prepared!
6. Use tools found in a dissection kit or a tweezers and toothpicks to carefully sort out the contents of the pellet.

- Sort all the bones onto a piece of black paper and discard the fur.
- According to your booklet, try to determine what your animal remains are. You can then glue your bones down on paper or poster board.
- Don't forget to take pictures!

**Evaluation**

- What is the purpose of this experiment?

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- What size owl pellet did you receive?  
Small      Medium      Large

- Explain below what you knew about owl pellets before the dissection, especially about what they are and how they are formed.

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- What do these pellets usually contain? \_\_\_\_\_

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- When removed from its packaging, the pellet looked:  
*(Circle your answers.)*

<b>Color</b>	Red	Brown	Black
<b>Shape</b>	Flat	Round	Oval
<b>Texture</b>	Smooth	Rough	

- Did you soak the pellet?  
*(Circle your answer.)*

YES      NO

- If so, describe your reaction when you strained it.

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8. What did your pellet contain?

*(Check all that apply.)*

- Grass
- Straw
- Bones
- Animal Skull
- Fur
- Feathers
- Animal Tail
- Claws
- Nails
- Dirt
- Other

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9. How many bones did your pellet contain?

- Zero
- 1–10
- 11–20
- 21–50
- More than 50

10. What type of animal did your pellet appear to contain?

- Vole/mouse
- Bird
- Shrew

11. I enjoyed/did not enjoy this experiment. In my opinion, this experiment was successful/unsuccessful because

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## **GRADES 1–3 OPTION: Feed-the-Birds Activity**

### **Materials**

- Pinecone (or several, if you wish)
- Peanut butter
- Bird seed
- String or yarn

### **Instructions**

1. Tie a piece of yarn around the pinecone. Leave a long tail extending.
2. Spread peanut butter all over the pinecone, heavily.
3. Roll the pinecone in birdseed, getting as much birdseed as you can on it.
4. Hang the pinecone from a bush or tree. Try to hang it where it will be somewhat protected from the rain (or snow).
5. Observe what happens over the next few days. Do birds begin to come to it? Do they eat from it? How long does it take for the birdseed and peanut butter to disappear? How much food is still on the pinecone each day?
6. Evaluation: In your science notebook, write (or have your teacher write) “Day 1,” “Day 2,” and so on. Record what you see each day, especially if you actually see birds eating from your pinecone.
7. Fill out a “Checking It Out” form. Put the form in your science notebook.