

Nature note: To-wit To-what?

There is a madrigal by the seventeenth-century composer, Thomas Vautor, called *Sweet Suffolk Owl*, which begins:

*Sweet Suffolk owl, so trimly dight
With feathers, like a lady bright;
Thou sing'st alone, sitting by night,
To whit! To whoo!*

The one I heard the other night by *Dumb Boy's Cottage*, sounded more like a quavering ooooooo, but never mind. In truth, we all see and hear what we want to with owls. With the possible exception of penguins, they are the most easily humanised of all birds. The combination of the upright stance on two legs, the soft tubby body-shape, large heads, flat faces, big round eyes and the steady gaze make them perfect material for the soft toys' department. Add their magical ability to

see in the dark, the extraordinarily acute hearing, their other-worldly cries and silent flight, and you can see how perfectly adapted they are as a receptacle into which we project a whole range of human affections and fears. They have accordingly featured in fables from the time of Aesop onwards and provide such favourite characters in children's stories as *Old Brown* in Beatrix Potter, the (dyslexic) *Wol* in A.A. Milne, *Wise Owl* in Alison Uttley, and most recently *Hedwig* in J.K. Rowling. But they also play darker symbolic roles in many of the world's myths and legends: *an abomination* according to the Bible, Shakespeare's *fatal bellman*, and *birds of omen dark and foul* for Sir Walter Scott. But how can they be the stuff both of innocent fancies and of nightmares? How can the proverbial *wise owl* also serve as the dread portent of death and disaster?

It's all down to some very special biological adaptations that have accidentally given rise to these cultural perceptions. Owls are neither wise nor ominous by constitution, but are superbly equipped predators. Those *flat faces* are really large facial discs shaped to funnel to their super-sensitive ears the faintest sounds made by invisible scurrying rodents. A tawny owl also has an exceptional spatial memory to enable it to navigate through familiar woodlands in almost pitch darkness; and in order to help with night vision their eyes are so large that they occupy all the space in the eye-sockets – they can't therefore swivel their eyes but can compensate by rotating their heads by up to 270 degrees. Their flight feathers have special baffles at the forward edge to muffle the sound of their wings and give them the advantage of surprise. And so on, every detail serving a purpose. The precision and efficacy of these adaptations is astonishing – and quite reason enough to prompt a sense of wonder ... and inspire a madrigal!



Tawny Owl

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