

Owl Play

by Ian Marshall, Norfolk. U.K.

Do owls play?

Yes.

How do you know?

I've seen them.

Environmental enrichment is a fairly new phenomenon in the zoo world. As far as owls are concerned the best collection that I have come across is the Chestnut Centre near Hope in Derbyshire. Here aviaries contain a variety of inventive measures designed to occupy the birds.

My owls like pine cones, sticks, bones; and large owls enjoy unravelling a short length of rope (with a knot at each end to make it a bit more of a challenge).

My pair of Tropical Screech Owls indulge in bouts of "pass the bone" using minute leg (I think) bones which I presume they obtain by pulling their pellets apart.

A Great Horned Owl used to regularly roost on one leg with a favorite stick clenched firmly in its free foot.

All the above articles are I suppose of fairly natural origin and are not going to make your aviary resemble Steptoe's back yard. However I must admit that the "toy" most enjoyed by the Brown Wood Owls I kept was made from a pair of old socks! By rolling one sock into a ball and pushing it into the other then knotting it a sort of animal shape, with a tail, is created — this will be pounced on, carried about the aviary, and eventually (after endless hours of fun) shredded.

The most recent observations of owls at play, and the one that prompted this article, concerns my pair of unrelated, 1999 bred White-faced Scops Owls *Otus leucotis*.

My aviaries are made in a single block with a safety porch running the length of the front (approximately ten meters). In front of each aviary I have installed a bulkhead light with a low wattage bulb, not too bright, so that I can sit in my conservatory with my

binoculars and watch all the pairs. As most owl behavior occurs after dark if you do not have lights you will see nothing of it.

The White-faced Scops like short lengths of twig and pine cones to play with.

During the last week of December 1999 the female was seen to be carrying a length of twig from perch to perch occasionally pausing to nibble one of the ends. The male watched intently then flew over and tried to steal the twig from the female's grasp. The female would fly to another perch with the twig followed by the male.

Occasionally the pair would indulge in beak touching and head preening before resuming the chase. Eventually the male managed to snatch the twig from the female and flew off with it.


In my opinion these "toys" can prove valuable catalysts in initiating social interaction within the pair.

Feed back/comments are welcome via email. Contact me at:

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Three owl oriented organizations which will be useful to contact for anybody interested in owls are:

- The International Owl Society:
www.owlsanctuary.co.uk
- World Owl Trust:
www.owls.org
- SCRO (based in British Columbia):
www.scro.comp-net-creations.net

The International Owl Society produces an excellent bi-monthly magazine called *Tyto* which is sent free to members (you will even be able to read my articles in it). 

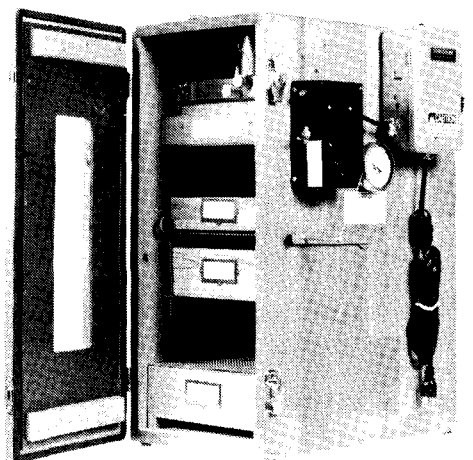


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