Are You an Owl Enthusiast?

January and February offer guests several opportunities to learn about owls and other birds that call the Nature Center home. If you would like a personal encounter, a hike on one of the Nature Center’s many trails may reveal a sleeping owl hiding in a tree. In fact, a great horned
owl’s tufts probably help it blend in among the branches that conceal it from view during the day. If a flock of crows, jays, or even chickadees discover the slumbering predator, they will raise the alarm and drive it from its perch. Be sure to listen for small birds making a ruckus. That usually means something interesting is hiding nearby. If you don’t spot an owl on the trail, stop by the Hardwicke Interpretive Center to view our live great horned owl ambassador and her next-door neighbor, the red-shouldered hawk.

For those who enjoy hands-on learning, join a naturalist to dissect an owl pellet. Pellets contain the indigestible bits of a bird’s meal, including bones, fur, feathers, and teeth. The pellet is rolled into a ball in the bird’s stomach, with the smooth fur or feathers on the outside. It is then regurgitated. Pellets prepared for educational use typically come from barn owls. Dissecting a pellet is a great illustration of the role these birds play in the ecosystem as rodent exterminators. Most pellets will have two or three vole or mouse skeletons. Occasionally, a lucky guest will find bird or rat bones. Pellets are a valuable tool for scientists who want to know more about a living bird’s diet. Instead of following the bird to observe it directly (which can alter the bird’s behavior) or dissecting the bird after death, pellets provide an easily accessible and non-invasive daily record of what an individual is eating.

If you enjoy knowing more about helping owls and other birds beyond supporting protected places like the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, our January workshop, “Backyard Bird Habitats,” provided the answers. This workshop covered all the basics of providing appropriate food, water, and shelter in your own backyard. This may mean offering commercially available bird seed, or it may mean planting native plants that produce seeds for birds. Want to provide housing? You might consider leaving a dead tree standing if it is not endangering structures or people. You might also build a bird house, but what kind? Participants had the option of building their own screech owl box to take home with them. This style of box is also suitable for kestrels depending on where the box is hung. Master Naturalists earned advanced training hours for attending the workshop.

*Elizabeth Bittner, Park Naturalist*