mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Why do owls say ‘hoo’?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

That's where it was—it was right there. Hi, it's Doug! So, the other night I was out here and this big animal turned its head and was looking right at me. It took me a second to realize it was an owl. I live in a big city so I forget that there are owls around me. But owls live just about everywhere.

Someone named Destiny has a question for us about owls. Let's give her a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Destiny!
- Hi, Doug!
- I have a question for you. Why do owls say hoo?
- That's a great question.

Why do owls say hoo? You know—hoo-hoo—like that. Well, I'm going to play you the sounds of four different birds. After listening to each sound, raise your hand if you think it's an owl. Okay, here we go. Sound number one. Okay. Sound number two. Okay. Sound number three. And sound number four. Okay, are you ready to find out which ones were owls? I'll play each sound again, and as I do, I'll reveal a photo of the bird that made the sound. Here we go. They were all owls! Number three was probably the one you guessed that was an owl. It's the call made by a great horned owl. Sometimes I hear these in the park near my house. They make the

classic—hoo-hoo—sound you might have heard in movies, like this. But not all owls sound the same, do they? There are many different kinds, or species, of owls. Each species of owl makes a different call. This one is a boreal owl. And this one, a barn owl. Ugh! Sounds terrible. And then this one is a snowy owl. Now, were you surprised? In fact, the great horned owl is one of only a few species of owls that make a hoo-hoo sound. But, why do owls make sounds at all? Do you have any ideas?

Scientists have studied this. They found out that owls tell other owls where they are by using their calls. Each owl has a territory or an area where it lives and hunts for food. It doesn't want other owls coming into its territory. So, by calling, it's usually telling other owls—stay out. Okay, I've got one more bird sound for you. See if you can guess what it is. Do you have a guess? Alright. Now, I'll reveal to you what it was. It's not an owl, it's a dove. This bird is called a mourning dove. Mourning doves make a hoo sound. Kind of like a great horned owl. They go hoo-*hoo*-hoo-hoo. So, owls aren't even the only birds that say, hoo. If you only hear them, but you don't see them, how could you tell them apart? Well, it's pretty easy, actually. Doves are like most birds. They're only out during the daytime. Owls are, of course, nocturnal. You're only going to hear them in the late evening or at night. You can go out in the evening and look for owls. You can even try calling them. They might respond back to you. I'm totally serious. I've made the sound of a barn owl and had one call back to me once. You might even have more than one kind of owl where you live. Where I live, I can hear both barn owls and great horned owls. So, in summary, owls make sounds to tell other owls where they are. Different kinds of owls make different sounds. Not many species actually make that hoo-hoo sound. But you can learn to identify owls and really any bird by the sound that they make. That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Destiny, for asking it.