

Math Mystery of the Forest Owls

Several weeks after the sunflower seed mystery, the sun started rising earlier and earlier in the morning. It was definitely getting closer to summer. Farmer Garth liked to get to Hidden Villa a little before beginning his work day. He like to ramble down his favorite trails and see what animals were out and about. On one such morning he was walking along when he spotted something interesting in the bushes. His excitement rose when he got closer and could see that - yes - it was a real owl pellet. This had to mean there were owls living somewhere nearby.

Being a curious naturalist, Farmer Garth wanted to find out what this owl had eaten for dinner. He knew that all owls swallow their prey whole and then cough up the fur and bones they can't digest in neat little balls. All he had to do, then, was carefully pull apart the owl pellet and take a close look at its contents to discover what this owl had eaten for dinner. Farmer Garth quickly got out his Swiss Army tweezers and started plucking the pellet apart. First he saw bits of matted gray fur, then two long front teeth and finally a tiny little skull. A mouse had definitely been this owl's midnight snack!

As Farmer Garth started to walk away, he noticed that there was another owl pellet fallen beneath a bracken fern. This got him wondering, maybe this hadn't been a case of an owl just passing through. How many owl pellets were around this tree in all? After careful inspection, Farmer Garth

found a total of four owl pellets, all containing the remains of one little, unfortunate mouse. Realizing what this quantity of owl pellets all in one place had to mean, he pointed his binoculars straight towards the sky so that he was looking right into the top most branches of the closest tree. And yes! There were two big owl eyes looking down at him. Or was it two eyes? As he strained his vision, Farmer Garth could make out not one, but two little owl bodies tucked up in the branches. He was so excited! It had been a long time since there had been owls living in this part of the forest.

Farmer Garth wanted to keep searching the forest for other owl families, but he had to hurry back to the environmental education building to welcome this day's group of student. Instead, he decided to bring his little group of explorers back to this part of the forest. Maybe together they could find another tree with owls.

When he returned to the forest with his group, Farmer Garth shared his early morning experience with the students. He described what an owl pellet looked like and gave them clues about where to look. Then they spread out and started looking. Suddenly, a pair of students cried out that they had found something. Not one to pass up a teaching opportunity, Farmer Garth helped his students pick apart the owl pellet. "It's like a mystery," he told them, "all the clues you need to figure out what this owl ate is right here!" The group discovered that this owl had also caught a mouse last night. Out of curiosity, the students spread out and continued to look more carefully in this area for more owl pellets. They were a very

observant group and found five more, each containing the remains of an owl's mousy snack. Farmer Garth was beginning to wonder if these owls hadn't taken up hunting in the garden at night.

The students noticed that they had discovered all of the owl pellets beneath one particular tree. So, Farmer Garth taught his students how to adjust his binoculars and they took turns searching through the branches for owls. Finally, one student thought she'd found something. Farmer Garth took a look and she was right! There was an owl nest, with not two, but three owls taking a well-earned mid-day nap! The fledgling was so big it looked like it was almost ready to leave his parent's nest and start life on his own. He was definitely old enough to have already learned how to hunt for himself.

The next morning, Farmer Garth woke up super early so that he would have time to go back and really explore the forest before starting work. After much searching, he did find another tree surrounded by fallen owl pellets. He couldn't believe it! After looking under every little branch and fallen leaf he had found a total of eight owl pellets! As he turned his binoculars skywards, he wondered how many owls he was going to find sleeping in this tree. "Nesting owls at Hidden Villa," he thought to himself, "how exciting!"

How many owls do you think Farmer Garth will discover in this tree?