



# Owl and Woodpecker

A Navajo Tale

## Cultural Note

To the Navajo, the owl is a bearer of bad news. When an owl appears, it may be a warning that something terrible is about to happen. When a traditional Navajo sees an owl, he prays for intervention, protection, and guidance.

## Vocabulary

distinguish

fragile

pleaded

preened

soared

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A Navajo Tale



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The little ground creatures and *ts'dii*, birds, had spent another sleepless night. They stood huddled in a circle, shaking with fear and anger.

Squirrel spoke first, "It's that rotten Owl who is responsible for all our misery."

"If he keeps this up," said Chipmunk, "We'll all be dead."

"I don't even dare leave my burrow these days," said Rabbit.

"We're no match for his keen eyes and sharp talons. He can snatch us right from the air!" added one of the little birds.



“He starts his deadly hunt as soon as the sun goes down, and he’s after us until sunrise,” whined Squirrel.

“We can’t fight him. He has a huge wingspan, and he’s powerful and evil.”

“We’ve got to do something. He sleeps during the day. Who among us can get close enough to him and kill him while he sleeps?”

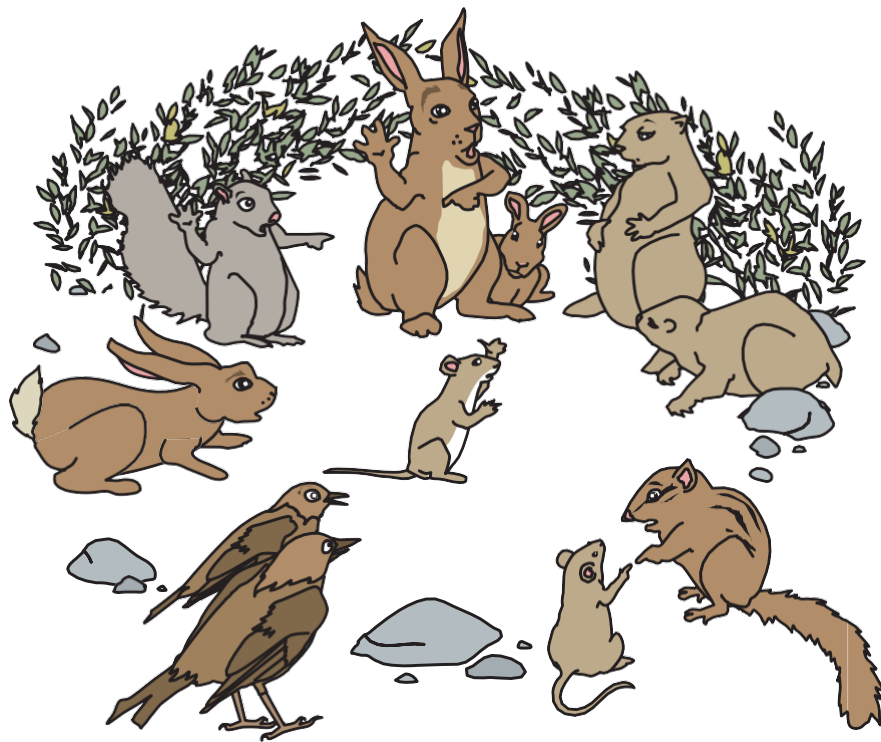
"Rabbit is fast," suggested someone.

"Oh no, not me. I can't climb trees. Let Squirrel go after him. He can climb trees faster than anyone else," said Rabbit.

"Not me." said Squirrel. "I'm too fragile. Let Prairie Dog go after him. He has huge, sharp front teeth."

"No, I can't," said Prairie Dog. "I'm too chubby, and I don't move fast enough. Let Mouse get him. He is small enough that he can sneak up before Owl even knows he's there."

"I'm his favorite food," complained Mouse. "He'll smell me right away."





“How about the birds? Let the birds go after him. They can fly.”

The birds protested as well. Finally, one of them suggested, “Why not let Woodpecker help us? Where is Woodpecker?”

Woodpecker was a loner who kept to himself. He had a safe home in a hollow log with such a tiny hole for an entrance that Owl could not reach him.

“Let’s all go see him and talk to him together. We’ll ask for his help. If we all go, he won’t be able to refuse.”





They all gathered outside Woodpecker's hollow home, and Sparrow called to him, "Woodpecker! Come out here! We need your help."

Woodpecker flew out of his hole and perched proudly on a branch. He stuck out his chest to show off his silky feathers and his long beak. He broke off a branch and pecked it to pieces with his beak, just to show off how sharp it was. Then he looked down on them and asked, "How can I help all you little creatures?"





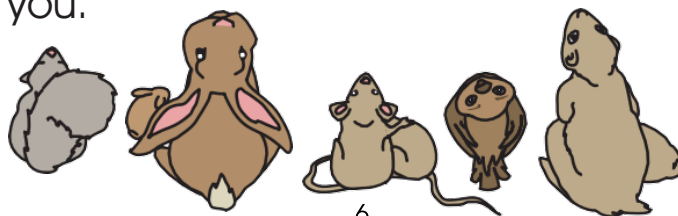
They spoke all at once, "We need you to get rid of that nasty night creature for us."

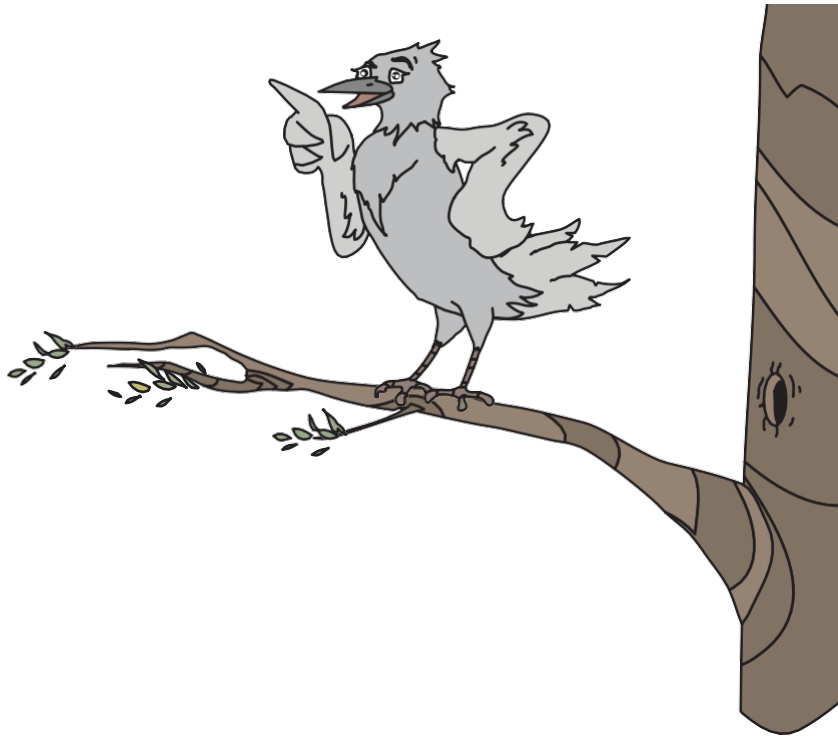
"Owl is killing us all off. We're powerless against him, but you are brave and well known for your strength."

"We need to protect ourselves and our children from him. If you don't do something to stop his horrible night hunts, he'll eat us all before long."

"Please help us," they pleaded.

Woodpecker listened to the animals. He flexed his wings and preened himself as he thought about what the little creatures were saying. He paced back and forth majestically on his branch, his feathers laced behind his back. Finally, he spoke, "You are right. I am strong and I am brave, and it is right that I should help you."





Woodpecker continued to pace on his branch and think. "But," he added, "if I kill Owl, you must promise that you will put his body to some useful purpose. I don't kill lightly."

"We promise!" they all said together.

"There must be something we can do with the old hoo's lifeless body," added Rabbit.

"If I'm going to surprise him, I'd better do it right now before he wakes up to begin his nightly hunt." With that, Woodpecker lifted his wings and soared away to where Owl slept. The birds and animals followed behind him at a respectful distance.



When Woodpecker reached Owl's perch, he found him fast asleep, just as he had expected. He landed next to Owl and suddenly, with lightning speed, he hammered Owl's head with his strong, sharp beak. Once, twice, three times, and a final deadly blow. He struck with all his might, and Owl fell from the branch to his death. He never even knew what had hit him. The animals watched in horror and delight.

When Owl fell to the ground, they gathered around him and shouted joyously, "Owl is dead! The evil one is dead!"

They danced and shouted and sang around his lifeless body. Then in the midst of their celebration, Squirrel remembered, "We promised Woodpecker that we would use him for something good."

"What will we do with him?"

Squirrel had an idea. He covered his hands with Owl's blood and smeared a streak down his forehead. Chipmunk and Mouse did the same. The other animals joined in. Some smeared the red blood down their backs or around their necks.

Some even painted it around their eyes.

Rabbit took Owl's down feathers and said, "I will use these to make myself soft and fluffy." He put them on his chest and tail.





The birds were more imaginative. They painted themselves beautifully. Some painted rings around their necks. Others painted their breasts red. Some made stripes down their backs, and others painted their heads. Many colored their wings or their tail feathers with Owl's blood.

Even Woodpecker took some of the blood and painted his head a bright, beautiful red to distinguish himself as a leader. The creatures were grateful to Woodpecker, and they gave him the name *Tsjitkaatii*.

Today, because Woodpecker killed Owl, there are many beautifully adorned creatures in the sky and on the ground.

## Glossary

*'jóhonaa'éí - sun*

*Ná'áshjaà - owl*

*tsídii - bird*

*Tsítkaatii - woodpecker*

*tsin - tree*

## Reading Suggestions

- Create a pictorial story about an animal.
- Create or retell another traditional story.
- Write an original tale about another animal.

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