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What is an owl?

The Hobby was bent on killing or driving away some enemy. She arrowed down through the canopy of a stringybark with her wings in a tight arc, then looped up, rolled over, and stooped through the branches again, calling as she attacked. A Southern Boobook and its fluffy young were day-roosting in Canberra woodland. The young had become restless and started to stretch and move in a shady tree, too close to the Hobby's nest. Even though Boobooks are hardly bigger than Hobbies, something in the owl's form and behaviour singled it out as a natural enemy (see Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3). Many birds react this way to owls, and researchers around the world tether owls to perches in front of nets to capture falcons and other birds of prey that attack them and try to drive them away.

What makes an owl so recognisable to birds such as Hobbies, and recognisable to us? Compared to most other birds, owls are relatively large-headed with relatively large brains and very large forward-looking eyes, so large that their eyes are virtually immobile in their sockets. Most other birds and animals have smaller sideways-looking eyes that can look out for predators attacking from the side or behind. The large size of an owl's eyes gives them excellent vision at night, similar to a domestic cat's vision, and like a cat they can also see well during daytime. This large head with forward-looking eyes gives them an almost human look and makes them appealing to humans in the same way that cats or monkeys are appealing, especially their young. Owls have a rather short, decurved, powerful beak that is partially hidden in rictal bristles, almost like a bristly moustache. Some, like the Boobook, have white 'eyebrows' and all owls have closable upper eyelids that add to this 'human' look. They sleep head-erect with eyes closed by twin eyelids. Probably