

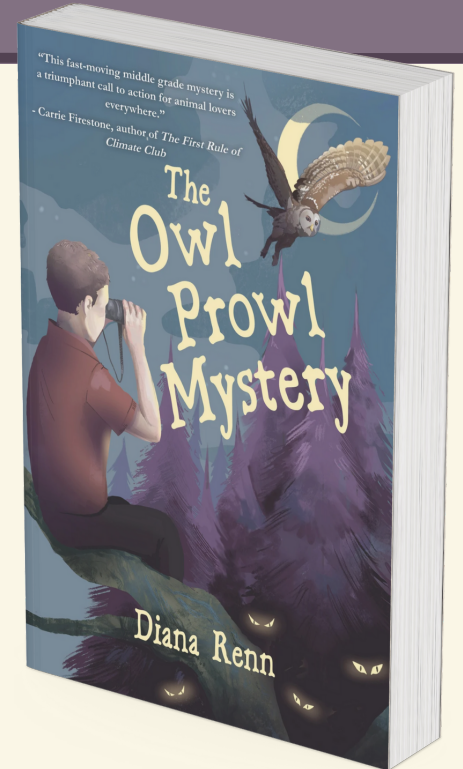
DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY

Ever since the Backyard Rangers saved turtles in their town, Miles thought his troubles were behind him. But adjusting to his new school hasn't been easy, and now there's a new wildlife problem. Birdwatchers and paparazzi are flocking to see Marsh Hollow's newest celebrity, "Bella" the barred owl. The crowds are putting all of Marsh Hollow's owls on a deadly collision course with humans. Miles and his friends spring into action, launching a campaign to protect their feathery friends. When Miles discovers that someone is baiting and trapping owls, wildlife photographers, birders, neighbors, and kids all become suspects. Soon, owls aren't the only thing that's threatened—secrets, tensions, and a rival group of rangers put friendships to the test. Will this be the end of the Backyard Rangers? Or can they band together and solve the mystery before more owls get hurt?

THE BACKYARD RANGERS ECO-MYSTERIES

The Backyard Rangers mysteries feature community science, activist kids, and the power of paying attention. *The Owl Prowl Mystery* is a follow-up to *Trouble at Turtle Pond*, but the books can be read as standalones or out of sequence. *The Owl Prowl Mystery* does make some reference to the turtles from Book One, as children are caring for endangered freshwater turtles in their classrooms even though the curricular focus is birds.



AUTHOR: Diana Renn

READING AGE: 9-12

GRADE LEVELS: 4-6

PRINT LENGTH: 252 pages

PUBLISHER: Fitzroy Books / Regal House

RELEASE DATE: August 13, 2024

RETAIL PRICE: \$16.95

SPECS: 5.47" x 8.46", paperback

ISBN-13: 9781646034789

ISBN-10: 1646034783

Special thanks to author and educator Kimberly Behre Kenna (kimberlybehrekenna.com) for consulting on this Discussion and Activities Guide, and to Renee Combs (reneeloveswords.com) for the design of this guide.

THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This middle grade novel is well-suited to the school and library market. With its themes of conservation, community science, and ecology, *The Owl Prowl Mystery*, like its predecessor *Trouble at Turtle Pond*, adds an engaging complement to a STEAM curriculum. The novel can also complement an English Language Arts curriculum, as it introduces young readers to the classic elements of mystery novels; young sleuths piece together clues, investigate suspects, and analyze the suspects' means, motives, opportunities, and alibis. Additionally, the novel supports a social-emotional learning curriculum in its exploration of friendship issues, which include making new friends, engaging in competitive versus cooperative activities, understanding how different families have different rules, setting personal boundaries, and knowing when teasing crosses a line.

The novel models mindfulness practices, as the Backyard Rangers engage in sustained observation activities, paying close attention to the natural world in their yards and community spaces. Finally, the novel speaks to neurodiversity by presenting a sleuth with diagnosed ADHD and a range of other characters who think and see the world a bit differently.

The questions and activities in this guide correlate with common core standards in the United States, though they have not specifically been labeled as such, and the novel and guide can be used by schools or programs internationally.

The Owl Prowl Mystery has a wider audience beyond the traditional classroom, so this discussion and activities guide is designed with broad application in mind. The novel and this accompanying guide can be used flexibly by environmental education programs, zoos and wildlife sanctuaries, camps, homeschool networks, arts programs, and families.

Discussion questions can easily convert to writing prompts for informal journaling or for more formal paragraph response assignments. Activities encourage both observation and action and can be modified for younger and older students.

Wherever possible in this guide, readers are encouraged to extend the activities and discussion into a consideration of how they apply to their own neighborhoods, communities, or ecosystems. Variations and extensions for activities are provided to encourage field work outside of the classroom.

THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

A NOTE ON BIRD NAMES

Should bird names be capitalized? This is a current debate in the birding world! The novel and this discussion guide follow the Chicago Manual of Style for references to birds, typically using lower case for bird names when referring to a general group of birds. Historically, the American Ornithological Society and some other birding organizations have maintained English names of birds should be capitalized. Capitalization choices are tricky! There are instances where capital versus lower case usage affects correct bird identification. For example, a Yellow Warbler and a yellow warbler may not mean quite the same thing – one is a species name, and one is a warbler that happens to be yellow. Publishers may follow different schools of thought on capitalization, so the conventions you see in a birding field guide or a birdwatching magazine may be different from what you see in a novel. If you or your students notice what appear to be inconsistencies with capitalization, this brief overview may help to explain why, and there are many online articles delving into the issues.

In addition, beyond capitalization conventions, some *names* of birds are now in flux. As of November 2023, the American Ornithological Society announced that North American birds will no longer be named after people; as a result, dozens of bird names (such as Cooper's hawk, Lincoln's sparrow, Blackburnian warbler) will change. At the time that this novel went to press, new names had not yet been publicized. There is a reference to a Cooper's hawk in the novel, and it may have a different name in the not-so-distant future. While this change will undoubtedly require the updating of field guides and other resources, the bird renaming project is designed to be more inclusive and to give species more descriptive names.

Finally, birding organizations themselves are undergoing name changes. Some regional chapters of the National Audubon Society have changed their name to avoid association with 19th-century naturalist and illustrator John James Audubon, whose legacy is complicated by racist views, slave ownership, and allegations of academic fraud. *The Owl Prowl Mystery* does not delve into this topic, but it does make reference to the National Audubon Society as an important resource the Backyard Rangers use for information.

It may be a worthwhile activity to bring up any of these naming issues with young readers. While the story focuses on visual and auditory identification of birds, the use of language to describe and label birds continues to evolve. The naming changes are a way to extend discussion of one of the book's themes: how accurate identification of birds is sometimes challenging, yet important, as it has repercussions for scientists collecting data, conservationists protecting birds, and community attitudes and behavior around birds.

THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) In what ways are some people in Marsh Hollow not being good neighbors to birds? How can they be better neighbors to birds? Give examples from the book.
- 2) Have you seen people in your community doing things that help or harm birds? Give examples from your experience.
- 3) How do people lure (or attract) owls in the story? List all the ways you can remember. What are some consequences of humans luring owls? Are there any situations when it's okay to lure owls?
- 4) Why do the Backyard Rangers disagree about how to help the owls? What else do they disagree about? What helps the rangers eventually overcome their differences and work as a team—especially with the Frontyard Rangers?
- 5) There are many types of competitions in the story. List all the examples you can find. Are these competitions presented in a positive or a negative way—or both? Then list examples of cooperation in the novel. How do people cooperate to solve problems and save the owls?
- 6) Is it possible to care about an owl, or any animal, so much that we end up causing it harm? Can you find examples in the story where people think they are helping, but aren't? What is the most helpful thing that people could do for owls like Bella?
- 7) What do the Backyard Rangers do to take care of the wildlife refuge and the area around Turtle Pond? Why do they feel they need to do this?
- 8) Why do the Frosts temporarily close the public loop trail through their woods? What are their concerns? What are the consequences of closing the trail to the public? What are the consequences of keeping it open?
- 9) Do you believe people have a responsibility to protect birds and other wildlife on their own property? Why or why not? How do the Backyard Rangers feel about private versus public property? How is Celeste Frost's family property—the Frost Woods—both good *and* bad for birds?

THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

- 10) “Art can change people,” Malik says to Miles. How might Miles’s cartoon-like owl posters change people? Does “artivism” (art + activism) work? Have you ever changed your mind or your behavior after seeing art? What happened?
- 11) Why is rat or mouse poison dangerous for owls? What are the clues that Bella might have consumed a poisoned mouse? How can people control rodent populations without using poison?
- 12) What makes someone a “person of interest” in a crime? What makes someone a “person of interest” as a potential friend? Why do you think Miles has an easier time finding people of interest connected to the bird problems, and a harder time making new friends?
- 13) How does “mistaken identity” happen in the story? List all the examples you can remember. What are some consequences of incorrectly identifying birds? What are some consequences of incorrectly identifying people in connection to a crime?
- 14) Describe Malik Martin’s bird photos compared with Jesse Blake’s. How are they similar? How are they different? How would you describe their styles as wildlife photographers?
- 15) On page 170, Pia says to Miles, “You don’t have to see something to care about it and help it.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Have you ever helped an animal you have never seen?
- 16) Are owls predators or prey? Or both? Give examples from the story.
- 17) Do you think people should publicize locations of owls or rare birds they have seen? Why or why not? Use examples from the story to support your opinion.
























THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

ACTIVITIES

The activities in the following section are designed to let students extend the themes of the book by conducting research, creative projects, or more extensive speaking and writing tasks. They are aligned with curricular areas, which often overlap.

Note: Some of the activities are about birds in general, and not just owls, in order to encourage extension activities and observations from real life. Owls are not always visible or audible, depending on location, time of year, and other factors.

Curriculum Correlations	ELA	Math	Science	Engineering	Visual Arts	Theater Arts
Design a Bird-Friendly Space						
Birding Debates						
Spark Bird						
Bird Count						
Build a Bird Blind						
Stewards of Forgotten Land: Poster Campaign						
Owl Theater						
Story Sequence: Flip Book or Storyboard						
Owl Music						
Celebrity Owls in the News						

DESIGN A BIRD-FRIENDLY SPACE

Step 1: Ask students to list the dangers owls and other birds might face in yards, neighborhoods, or other community spaces. They can use examples from the book and their own observations.

Step 2: Ask students to list ideas for how to make outdoor spaces safer for owls or other birds. They can find examples in the book or do research to find more ideas.

Step 3: Have students draw a map of a yard or other outdoor area with specific features of bird-friendly spaces (or hazardous spaces) clearly labeled. They can focus on either the dangers or the safety features.

Extension: Have students create a 3-D model of their bird-friendly space.

THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

BIRDING DEBATES

Step 1: Have students work in pairs or groups to choose one of the two topics below and a position: yes or no. (You can also assign them a topic and a position.)

- Does photographing owls (or other birds) help them or harm them?
- Does sharing bird sightings and locations on social media help them or harm them?

Step 2: Have students find at least three reasons and examples from the book to support their opinion. Ask them to decide on the order in which they will present their reasons and examples. Will they start or finish with the most important point?

Step 3 (optional): Have students anticipate the other viewpoint's objections to their opinion and come up with a response to it.

Step 4: Have students debate their topic with a student or group who has the opposite opinion. Then discuss: what reasons and examples felt the most compelling?

SPARK BIRD

Step 1: In the book, Malik Martin says the purple martin is his “spark bird”—the bird that sparked his interest in birding. Ask students to recall what Miles named as his possible spark bird. (Hint: one of his sparks was a person!) Then ask them to identify their own spark birds. It can be a bird they see often, a bird they would like to see more often or feel curious about, or even a bird they have never seen in person but would like to learn about. Provide access to birds through field guides, either in print or online, to expose them to more options. (The Cornell Ornithology Lab's free online resource, <http://allaboutbirds.org>, is a good starting point.)

Ask students to use field guides or online resources to find out the following information about their spark bird:

- Size
- Color(s)
- Sounds
- Habitat
- One more interesting fact

Step 2: Ask them to draw a picture of their spark bird and include the information they found, imagining that it is an entry in a field guide or for a poster display.

Variation: Have students work together to create informational bird trading cards, like Miles makes for the owls.

THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

BIRD COUNT

Have students put up a simple bird feeder, even one made of an empty milk or juice carton and containing a bit of birdseed. Hang it in an area where they have seen birds before—a yard, a park, a playground, trees at the edge of a parking lot, or somewhere else. Ask them to set a time limit of fifteen minutes. Ask them to count the birds they see coming to the feeder or nearby.

Discuss: What made this bird count easy or difficult to do? What are some challenges that can arise when we try to count birds?

Variation: Ask students to make some changes to the bird feeder. What happens if they scatter some seed on the ground? Do different birds come? What happens if they hang the feeder higher—or lower? What if they try observing at a different time of day? What if they use a different type of seed, or nuts? What changes lure the most birds to the feeder?

Variation: Ask students if they can identify by name any of the birds that come to the feeder. Consider providing access to a field guide or a birding app like Merlin to help them identify their feeder visitors.

Variation: Have students try making different types of feeders (you may need to find instructions online or in a library book) and take notes on how many birds come to each one, or what types of birds use the feeders. What features seem to be essential for most bird feeders?

BUILD A BIRD BLIND

Review the scene in which Miles and the Backyard Rangers build a bird blind in the woods. Elicit examples of the supplies used and the placement of the bird blind. Then ask students to list supplies they might use to design a bird blind in their own area. Would they do anything differently? Where would they place a bird blind? Ask them to draw the bird blind and label the features. What would most help them camouflage their structure to avoid startling or stressing out birds?

Variation: Have students build their bird blind—or create someone else's bird blind using their labeled drawing as a blueprint.



THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

STEWARDS OF FORGOTTEN LAND: POSTER CAMPAIGN

The Backyard Rangers have access to an unused patch of woods they call the Forgotten Forest. Their local wildlife refuge also faces problems due to budget cuts; no one is employed to regularly empty trash bins or help to maintain it, and human behavior puts birds in harm's way. The Backyard Rangers act as environmental stewards, picking up litter and starting a poster campaign to educate the public.

Ask students if they know of an overlooked or less-cared for area near them, or help them to identify such a place in your vicinity. This can even be a very small area, such as a patch of land that appears underutilized by humans, or a place where nature appears to be struggling.

Step 1: Ask students to observe the place or recall the birds, animals, and plants in that space. If they can observe in person, set them a time limit to create an inventory of everything they notice—including things that are not from nature, like human-made structures or even litter. Ask them to identify potential problems in that space.

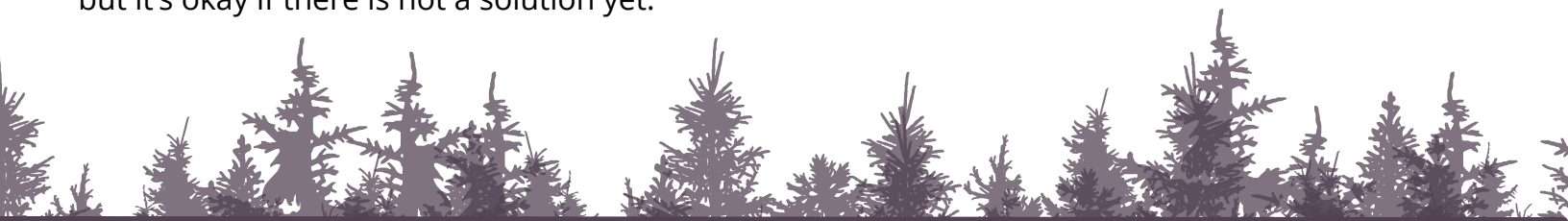
Step 2: Have students present a problem and solution in the form of a persuasive poster display or an oral presentation. They should try to persuade people that this place needs help and give them actionable steps to create change.

OWL THEATER

In the story, one of the Backyard Rangers, Luke Lin, has a role in a play; he and the other students help use this play to raise awareness of one of the problems affecting owls in their community. In this activity, students dramatize a problem concerning owls, considering different perspectives, and look for creative solutions.

Step 1: Have students work in pairs or groups to pick a scene from the book that features an owl. Encourage them to read the scene again and write an outline of the scene. They should also be able to identify a conflict or problem in the scene.

Step 2: Ask them to turn the scene into a short play (under ten minutes). They can cast themselves in the roles of the people (and owls) in the scene from the book, or write their own play inspired by that scene, creating other characters. Each short play should have a clear conflict or problem, but it's okay if there is not a solution yet.



THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Step 3: Have the students perform their scenes for one another. After each one, discuss how the short play or scene ended. Was the conflict or problem resolved? Or is it open-ended? Does the ending feel hopeful or not? Encourage students to brainstorm ways to change the ending of the plays, especially if they end on a less hopeful note. For example, they could add new character, or have one of the included characters influence a positive ending on the story.

STORY SEQUENCE: FLIP BOOK OR STORYBOARD

In the story, Miles is fascinated by owls in flight, whether they're soaring high above, leaving a perch, or actively hunting. Videos he watches inspire him to make flip books to animate the sequence. He also uses cartoon drawings to show owls not as perfectly accurate, but to educate people—using humor—about what owls might experience from their perspective, and some of the dangers they face.

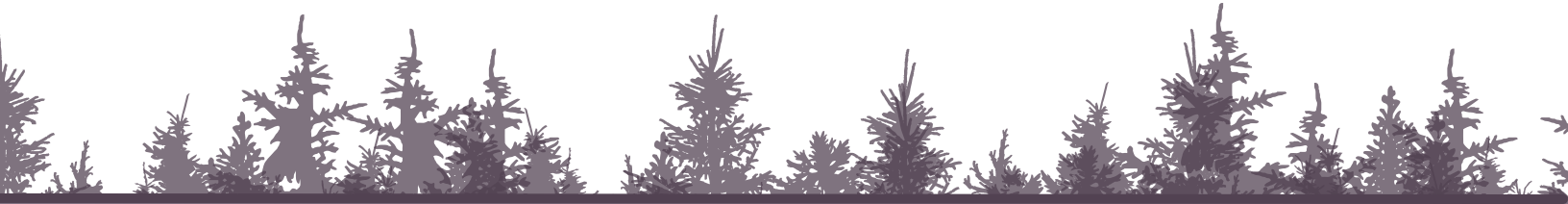
Step 1: Have students pick a scene with an owl in the book, or watch a video of an owl or other bird in flight as Miles does, and write down the steps in that sequence as a process. (It may help to slow down the clip by pausing every few seconds.) For example: *shakes feathers, looks up, lifts off, glides*. They may also pay attention to wingspan, and whether the feathers appear to flap or to remain still.

Step 2: Ask students to create a flipbook or a storyboard of panels to illustrate the sequence. If students are making a flipbook, they will need a small stack of paper, which can be cut down to size and stapled together. (There are many videos online with examples.)

Extension: Have students use library resources or websites to research how owls fly and find three surprising facts to share. How is owl flight different from that of other birds? How is it similar?

OWL MUSIC

Birders in the story identify birds both by sight and by hearing. Several different owl calls are described in the book. Sometimes we “translate” the owl calls into human words to help remember the rhythm. For example, the barred owl hoot is often “translated” as “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?” Miles also is tasked with creating a music composition on the recorder for a school project. The song he writes, “Delivery Truck,” sounds like the northern saw-whet owl’s “toots”—and eventually even helps him to summon that type of owl as an audio lure.



THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Ask students to choose one of the owl hoots mentioned in the book, or a different one, and use it in a song. (You may want to find examples of the hoots online to play for them.) Encourage them to use an instrument (or create an instrument, such as an empty soda can); they can also write lyrics if they feel inspired, or “translate” the hoots into words.

Owls mentioned in the story:

- Barred owl
- Great gray owl
- Great horned owl
- Snowy owl
- Northern saw-whet owl
- Barn owl
- Eastern screech owl

CELEBRITY OWLS IN THE NEWS

Some real-life stories of celebrity owls in North America inspired *The Owl Prowl Mystery*. Celebrity owls draw crowds because they are rarely seen in a particular region (for example, owls from Canada who venture south) or because they seem unafraid of humans and exhibit personality traits that attract human attention.

Step 1: Have students research one of these celebrity owls or other raptors online. (You may want to pre-select articles or TV clips for them to choose from.)

- “Barry” (Barred owl, New York City)
- “Flaco” (Eurasian eagle-owl, New York City)
- Great gray owl (Newport, New Hampshire)
- Snowy owl (Cypress, California)
- “MK,” bald eagle (Arlington, Massachusetts)
- Other? (Perhaps there is a celebrity owl or other bird near you!)

Step 2: Encourage students to find answers to the following questions:

1. Where was this bird originally from?
2. How did it get to this region?
3. What time of year did the bird visit or live in this region?
4. How long did the bird stay there?
5. Where was the bird usually seen?
6. What made the bird attract so much attention?
7. What happened to the bird?
8. What can people learn from this bird’s story?

THE OWL PROWL MYSTERY: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Step 3: Ask students to write a short report about the bird OR present the information in the form of a news story.

Extension: Have students film the “reporter” on the scene for a TV news segment, or have kids act out the story. They might even include some locals on the set, who could be interviewed about the celebrity bird—or even causing some chaos!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Calvez, Leigh. *The Hidden Lives of Owls: The Science and Spirit of Nature’s Most Elusive Birds*. Sasquatch Books, 2016.
- Erickson, Laura. *101 Ways to Help Birds*. Stackpole Books, 2006. This is a wonderful book worth reading in its entirety, but kids can easily access all the tips on her website: <https://www.lauraerickson.com/ways-to-help/>
- Leslie, Clare Walker. *How to Look at a Bird: Open Your Eyes to the Joy of Watching and Knowing Birds*. Storey Publishing, 2024.
- John Muir Laws: *Nature Stewardship Through Science, Education, and Art*. Website with examples and prompts for nature journaling, video tutorials, more teacher resources. www.johnmuirlaws.com
- Project OwlNet: <https://www.projectowl.net.org>
- Sibley, David Allen. *What It’s Like to Be a Bird* (adapted for young readers). Delacorte, 2023.
- Tallamy, Douglas W. *Nature’s Best Hope (Young Readers’ Edition): How You Can Save the World in Your Own Yard*. Timber Press, 2023.
- Wilson, Mark. *Owling: Enter the World of the Mysterious Birds of the Night*. Storey Publishing (2019).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Renn is the author of the middle grade eco-mysteries *Trouble at Turtle Pond* and *The Owl Prowl Mystery* (Fitzroy Books / Regal House), as well as three YA mysteries: *Tokyo Heist*, *Latitude Zero*, and *Blue Voyage* (Viking / Penguin Random House). Diana has also worked in educational publishing and taught ESOL, writing, and literature. Originally from Seattle, Washington, she now lives in Concord, Massachusetts in a neighborhood she shares with turtles and owls, some of whom have inspired her books. Visit her online at dianarennbooks.com and on Instagram at @dianarennbooks.

