

### Swallowing Food Whole on Land and in the Sea

Certain animals swallow their food whole for various reasons. For some animals this way of eating has to do with their anatomy. *Anatomy* is the parts of an animal's body. An owl does not bite or chew its prey, such as mice, fish, or smaller birds. Instead, it snatches the prey with its talons, or grasping claws. It swallows the prey whole through its beak. If an owl had teeth, it would attack and eat its food much differently.

Another animal that swallows its food whole is the seahorse. Like the owl, the seahorse does not have teeth. It does have a long snout to help it eat. This snout allows it to eat its prey whole. A seahorse eats shrimp, larval fish, and small crustaceans. Larval fish are fish that are in a lesser developed state than grown fish, and crustaceans are sea animals with shells. Examples of crustaceans are lobsters and crabs.

An owl's digestive system plays a large role in why it swallows its food whole. Since an owl does not grind or chew up its food, it swallows whole pieces of things like fur, bones, teeth, and feathers. These items are pressed into a tight, black pellet that is about as long as a sausage link. Seven to ten hours after it has eaten, the owl coughs out the pellet because it cannot be processed in the owl's digestive system. The owl is not sick when it drops a pellet from its beak. It simply drops the pellet to the ground. Since the pellet inside of an owl partly blocks the digestive system, the owl is ready to eat again after the pellet is gone.

A seahorse also has a special digestive system that causes it to eat its prey whole. A seahorse sucks prey through its long snout almost constantly because it has no stomach. Without a stomach, food passes right into a seahorse's intestines. The intestines absorb nutrients from the digested food and pass waste out of the seahorse. A seahorse has other organs, such as a liver and kidneys, in its digestive system. These organs also help a seahorse process the digested food.

Whether you learn about animals in the sea or on land, the unique anatomies of the owl and the seahorse play a large role in how these animals eat their food.

## Sources

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