

How Barn Owls Got Their Heart-Shaped Faces

Long, long ago, there were no people or animals or birds or fish on the earth. The creators had made mountains and canyons, lakes and rivers, prairies and forests, but no creatures at all.

Water Creator said, "I will fill the waters with wonderful creatures," and he did. He made fish of many kinds, and snails, and turtle, and frogs and so many different water creatures that he sat back in satisfaction and smiled. And all of them had eyes to see.

Land Creator was not going to be outdone. His magical creations took many months. And when he was done, the land contained bears and wolves, foxes and turkey, squirrels and muskrat, deer and mice, and so many more. All creatures were wonders to behold and all of them had eyes to see.

Air Creator said, "Now it is my turn," and the others laughed and said that nothing could live in the air. But he created dragonflies and doves, robins and ravens, mosquitoes and magpies. The other Creators were astonished. And all of them had wings to fly and all of them had eyes to see.

Now, the Great Creator, the one who made you and me, clapped her hands and said, "Wonderful! Will you make flying creatures for the nighttime sky, too?"

Air Creator pushed the sun down, pulled the moon up and said, "I will try." He grabbed three handfuls from the earth: brown clay, black earth, and crystal white snow, and threw them into the sky. They mixed together and fluttered to the earth.

"You will be named 'bats'," he said to one group. "And you are nighthawks." Then away they all flew. "But now I will create the best night creatures of all."

Oh, but sometimes the "best" can create problems as the Air Creator soon found out. The pure white owl, made completely from snow, he named the Great Snowy owl. But this owl thought he was too beautiful to be near the common brown creatures. Air Creator said, "I banish you to the cold and snow of the north! You are magnificent, but ungrateful."

Embarrassed, Air Creator tried again. He chose brown and black and made an immense, impressive owl. "Now, *you* are my Great creation. Always remember that I created you," said the creator.

But, the Great owl cried, "Who, hoo, hoo, hoo, hoooooooo."

Earth and Water Creators roared with laughter and the skies rumbled and shook. Air Creator was furious and pulled at the side of the owl's head. "Now you have great ears to hear me, and next time you will hear me clearly! Off you go!" And off to the forest he flew.

The Great Creator, being very patient, said, "You still have a little earth and clay and soil and snow. Try once more."

Air Creator sighed a heavy sigh and threw everything that was left together into the sky. When everything settled, there sat four slender owls with streaky brown and tan wings and shaggy white faces and no eyes to see. All the other Creators gasped in horror at the ugly birds.

"So what shall I call you, my ugly owls, eh? I will call you Barn Owls, since there is where you will hide all day long. What do you think of that?" he roared in frustration and shame and anger.

One little owl cleared his throat. "We are blest to be on your earth and will eat rodents and pests to help you. We are humble and thankful and will do as you wish."

The moon smiled and blasted a strong moonbeam from the sky that slicked back the ugly feathers from their faces. Now their white faces were smooth and beautiful. The Great Creator dotted two dots of black earth on each face. And then all of them had eyes to see.

The Air Creator softened his heart and smiled a broad smile. "You are my great creation, but I will never use the word "Great" again. To remember how beloved you are to me, around your face I will trace my heart."

And with a little bit of clay, each Barn Owl received their face-heart, which they still wear with love and humble pride to this very day