

# All About Owl Pellets

## What is an owl pellet?

Owls generally swallow their **prey** whole. They digest all the fleshy parts of the prey but are unable to digest the hair, fur and bones. In the **gizzard**, the **indigestible** body parts are formed into oval-shaped masses, called **pellets**. These pellets are **regurgitated** through the mouth, since they cannot be excreted through the digestive track. Each pellet may contain the remains of more than one prey animal if multiple animals were eaten within several hours. We can find out what an owl has eaten by examining the prey remains within a pellet.



whole owl pellets



owl pellet contents

## How do pellets form?



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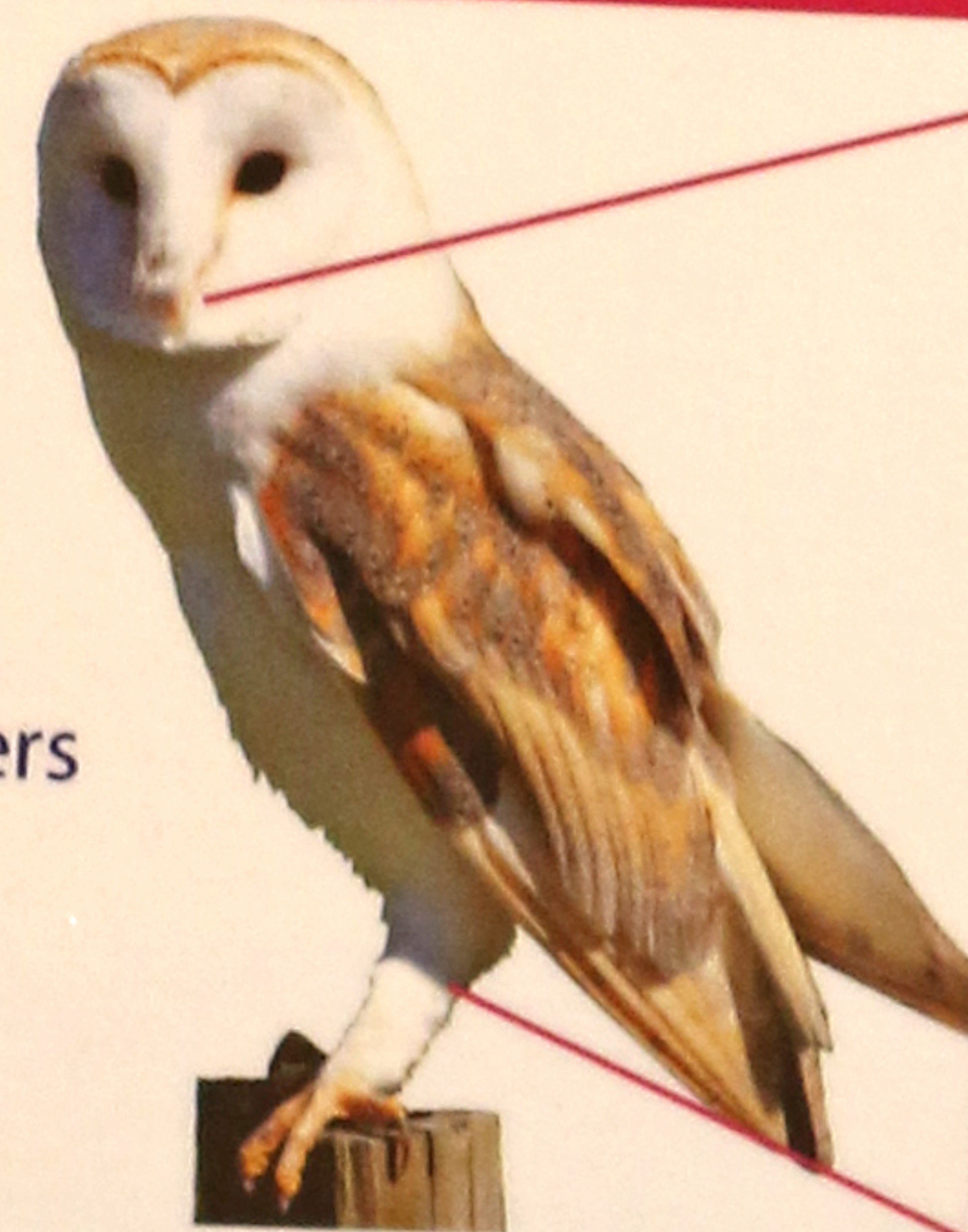
### 1 Catching the prey

Once the prey is caught, it is positioned head first in the beak. This barn owl has caught a shrew.



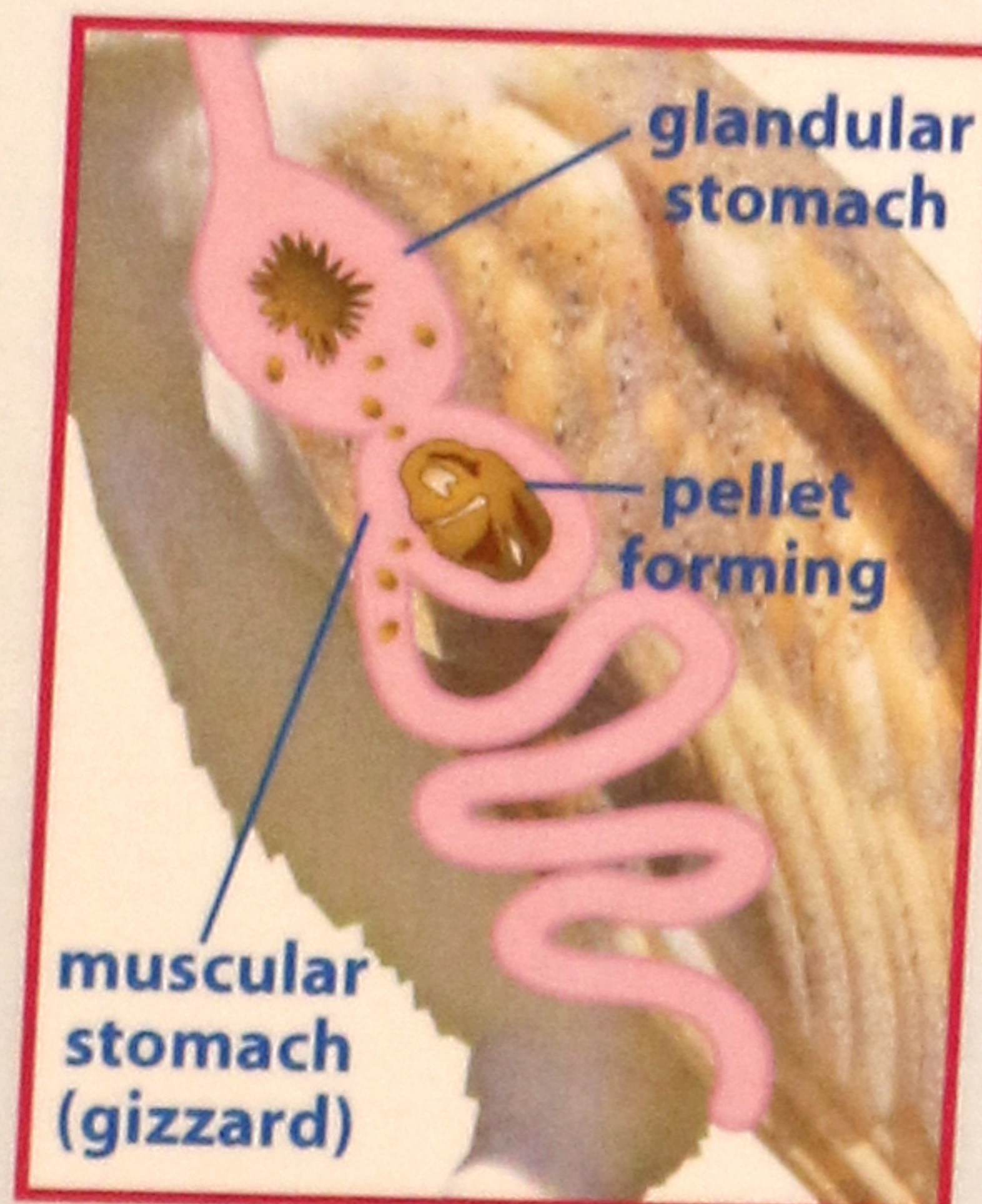
### 2 Swallowing the prey

The prey is swallowed, passing through the esophagus where it enters the **glandular stomach** or **proventriculus**.



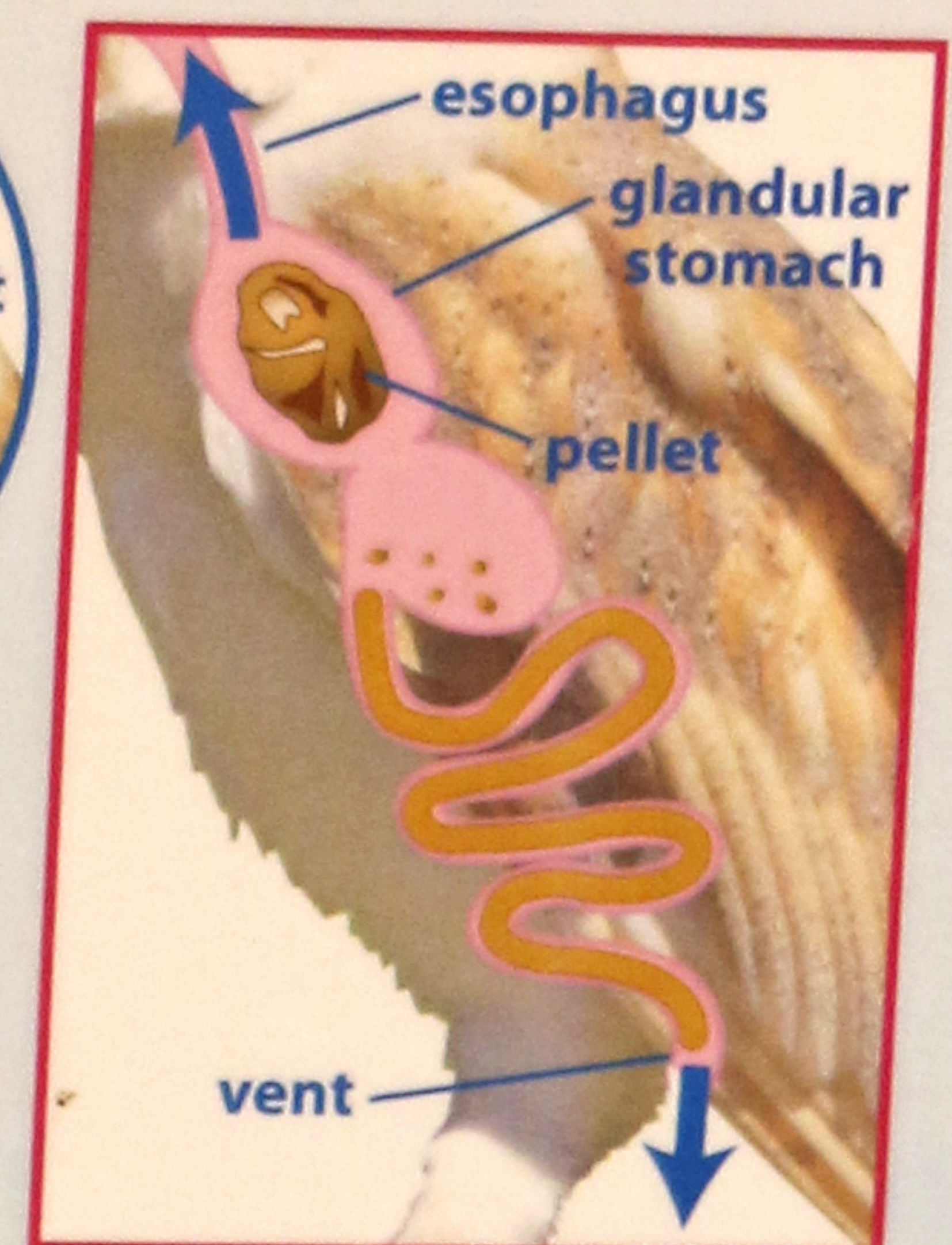
### 3 Digestion

The **digestion process** begins in the **glandular stomach** where enzymes break down the prey which then passes into the **muscular stomach** or **gizzard**. Nutrients pass through the intestines and are absorbed into the body while the indigestible parts are retained in the **gizzard** and formed into an **owl pellet** within six to ten hours of a meal. This pellet then travels back up into the glandular stomach where it is stored for several hours before it is **regurgitated**.



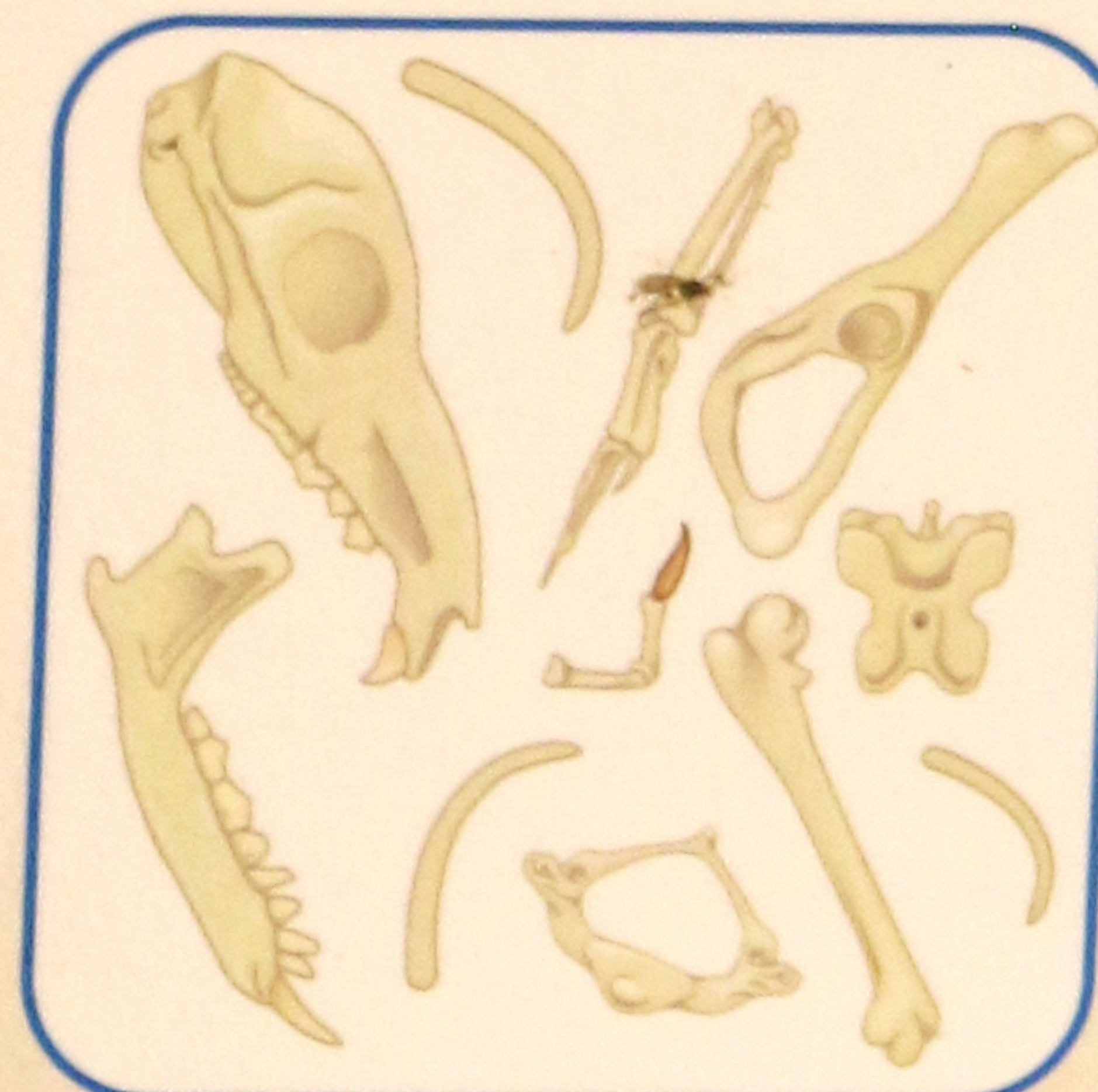
### 4 Regurgitation

Before the owl eats another meal, it must cough up or **regurgitate** the pellet. During this process, which can last from a few seconds to a few minutes, the **esophagus** begins to contract forcing the **pellet** out. The owl appears to be in great discomfort and seems like it is having difficulty breathing. However, once the pellet is out the owl is back to normal.



## What's inside an owl pellet?

Biologists learn about an owl's diet by examining its pellets that are regurgitated. Pellets contain the **indigestible remains** of prey animals such as rodents, shrews, moles, insects, reptiles and small birds.



bones



feathers, claws, teeth