

## ANIMAL FACT,

## ANIMAL FICTION

In folktales, owls are wise characters who give good advice. The **ancient** Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena, was often shown holding an owl. A person who understands many things is "as wise as an owl." Owls' big, staring eyes and their great hunting skills make these birds seem like thinkers. But are real owls wise?

In fact, owls are not among the smartest birds. To scientists who study learning, a smart animal is one that can solve a problem it has never seen before. Owls are not known for this **ability**. And people who train owls report that these birds are not quick to learn new tasks.



Someone who is not facing up to a problem may be compared to a different bird—an ostrich. The person is told, "Don't be an ostrich. Don't **bury** your head in the sand." Does an ostrich really bury its head in the sand?

In fact, ostriches never cover their heads with sand. They need to see danger to stay safe. These big, flightless birds have sharp eyesight. They are fast runners and strong fighters. So, how did people come to believe that ostriches

bury their heads? Ostriches lower their heads to move eggs in their nest on the ground. Seen from a distance, their heads appear buried by sand. An ostrich may also lie still with its long neck stretched out on the ground as a way of hiding when it senses danger.

Sometimes, a person who is only pretending to feel sadness is compared to a crocodile. "What crocodile tears!" others say about the false show of feeling. It was reported that

crocodiles cried while eating animals they had just killed—as if they were sorry about the deed. Do crocodiles really cry tears?



In fact, crocodiles do cry tears. As the crocodile eats, bubbles form in the corners of its eyes. Tears sometimes drip down the animal's face. The crocodile's tears are keeping its eyes **moist**. Its tears are not caused by strong feelings, like sadness about its poor victim. The tears are caused by the action of eating. The **glands** that **produce** tears are squeezed as the animal works its mighty jaws.

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Owls aren't wise, ostriches don't ignore danger, and crocodiles don't show false sorrow. Some ideas about animals turn out to be more **FICTION** than **FACT**.

## Animal Fact, Animal Fiction

### KEY VOCABULARY

- **ancient** (adjective) *Ancient* means very old.
- **ability** (noun) *Ability* is the skill to do something.
- **bury** (verb) To *bury* is to put something underground.
- **moist** (adjective) *Moist* means slightly wet.
- **glands** (noun) A *gland* is an organ in the body.
- **produce** (verb) To *produce* is to make.

- ▶ Who is Athena?
- ▶ Explain why people may think that ostriches bury their heads in the sand.
- ▶ What is another example of an expression that compares a person to an animal?
- ▶ How are the myths about crocodiles, ostriches, and owls connected?
- ▶ Which animal myth is closest to reality?
- ▶ Why do you think that people created myths around animal behavior?