

Short-Eared Owl

Asio flammeus

Almost all owls belong to the family *Strigidae*. Typically, owls are short-necked, large-headed birds of prey, with hooked bills and razor-sharp talons. All have large, immobile eyes embedded in fluffy, facial disks. Many are nocturnal, hunting only at night. Their silky plumage is almost soundless in flight, an adaptation that enables stealth stalking of their prey. Males closely resemble both females and immature birds, though females are larger. Short-eared Owls are so named for the erect but barely visible ear tufts atop their heads. As the most aerial of all owls, this tawny-colored owl can be mistaken for the Northern Harrier at a distance. Sadly, the Short-eared Owl was blue-listed as endangered from 1976-1986 and is still in decline throughout most of its range.

Partial to any open expanse, Short-eared owls are found among meadows, tundra and marshes. During the day, they may be found roosting on the ground or on open, low perches, such as muskrat houses. At 38cm, these owls are medium-sized, with long, narrow wings. Tawny overall, they are spotted above and boldly streaked below, although streaking fades on the paler belly. Dark eye-patches offset the large golden eyes that adorn their broad facial disks. In flight, their outstretched wings expose the buffy patches above and black wrist-marks below. Their easy, wavering flight is characterized by stiff, erratic wingbeats.

Silent except in the nesting season, the male Short-eared Owl gives a muffled "poo, poo, poo" in short series. When alarmed, both sexes bark out high, raspy, nasal notes "cheef, cheef, cheewaay."

Short-eared Owls nest on the ground in shallow, slightly rimmed depressions (scrapes) or, rarely, in ground burrows. Females select the nest site and only sparsely line it (if at all) with grasses, weeds and occasionally feathers. Often concealed by low vegetation, the nest is safe haven for the 4-14, 39mm, creamy white, unmarked eggs of the clutch. While the female alone incubates the clutch for 26-28 days, the male feeds her during this time. Young birds hatch asynchronously producing variously sized siblings in the nest. Both parents rear the young birds and fledging occurs in 31-36 days post-hatching.

Although Short-eared Owls predominantly hunt small mammals, they also consume small birds and insects. These owls hunt at dusk and dawn and may hunt communally when prey is abundant. The primary feathers of their wings are modified to eliminate the noise of airflow, creating virtually silent flight for hunting. Soaring low over open country, these owls swoop down from the air or their perches (hawking) to snatch-up their victims with their sharp talons.

Short-eared Owls winter communally throughout most of the United States and as far south and central and southern Mexico, but they may move erratically to areas with high rodent populations. During the breeding season, they occur

throughout Alaska, most of northern Canada and are scattered throughout southern Canada and the western United States.