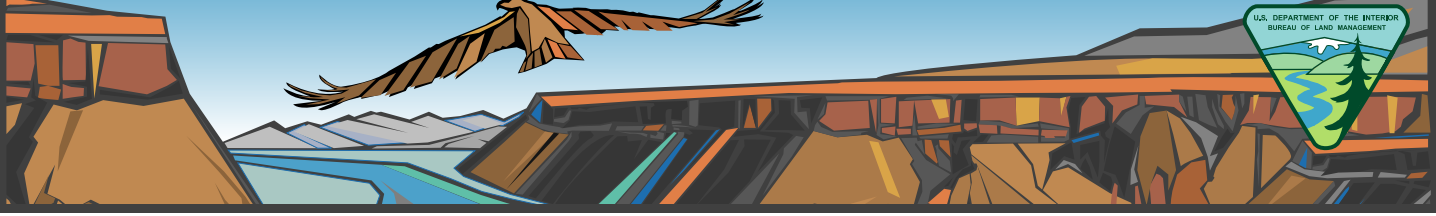


Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area



Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)

Description/Size

Wing span: 36-44 inches

Length: 13-17 inches

Weight: 7-17 ounces

A medium sized owl often seen at dusk flying low over the ground coursing open areas or sitting on a fence post. Head large and round with short/small ear tufts arising from center of forehead that are generally not seen. Buffy white facial disk with ring of brown. Dark brown to black around the eyes. Iris bright lemon yellow. Eyelids black. White and black bristles over mandible. Chin white. Upper parts are spotted; backside is deep brown with white mottling. Under parts white to buffy with dense brown vertical streaking on throat, chest and upper breast, thinning out on lower breast, belly and flanks, leaving pale lower belly. Thighs and legs white/buff, no streaks. Legs feathered to toes. Feet yellow. Long wings and medium tail are strongly barred. Underwing generally buff/white with distinct dark wrist patch. Bill, cere and talons are black. Female similar but darker than male. Juveniles – brown above with buff tips on the back feathers. Facial disk is brown black with white mustache and beard. Under parts are

buffy. Eight subspecies are recognized; only one in North America – *A.f. flammeus*. Two in S. America. Five are island endemics (Hawaii, Galapagos Islands, Micronesia, Falkland Islands, Greater Antilles)

Similar Species

Long-eared owl – nocturnal, long ear tufts, darker overall, more heavily streaked and barred ventrally, facial disk rusty, faint wrist markings.

Habitat/Range

Found on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. Also found on islands such as Iceland, the Hawaiian chain and the Galapagos. Almost always associated with open country which supports cyclic small mammals: marshes, tundra, open prairies, coastal grasslands, shrub-steppes, and agricultural areas up to 12,000 feet. Non-breeding habitat - Similar to breeding habitat and often turns into breeding areas if food is plentiful.

Food/Diet

Diet varies little throughout range, with little difference in food eaten seasonally or by sex or age of individuals.

Opportunistic hunter taking whatever small mammals and birds are most available. Mammals include: voles, mice, shrews, moles and rabbits; avian prey includes meadowlarks, blackbirds, horned larks, shorebirds, and small gulls. Birds are eaten more in coastal areas than at inland sites. Also takes a few insects such as grasshoppers, beetles, roaches and caterpillars. Consumes small mammals by swallowing whole or by clipping off head. Clips wings off most birds but does not pluck, then swallows whole or tears apart. Food storage or caching seen during all seasons and adults feeding young known to stock-pile up to five prey items.



Voice

Silent except in nesting season. Male territorial song is a pulsing *voo-hoo-hoo* lasting about 3 seconds; given mainly during flight displays. Female responds with a barking *kee-ow*. Alarm is high nasal bark and wheezy note *cheef cheef* and *cheewaaay*. Also squawks, hisses and squeals. Non-vocal sounds include bill-snapping which appears defensive and wing clapping given during courtship flights and nest defense. Wing clap sounds like cracking whip, given in rapid rattling series.

Behavior

Primarily crepuscular (most active at dusk and dawn) although they are sometimes active in the daytime. Hunts primarily on the wing, coursing low over the ground in search of prey. Will hover and drop vertically, pouncing on prey. Will occasionally hunt from a perch or while standing on the ground. Foraging flight is buoyant with slow, deliberate wing beats and glides on stretched wings over open landscapes. Flight is agile and maneuverable. Direct and fast wing-pumping flight when defending territories. Sleeps and roosts primarily on the ground; occasionally roosts in trees. Winter roosts can consist of as many as 100-200 birds. Communal roosting may help with protection from predators and enhance feeding efficiency. This behavior may also help to establish pairs at the onset of the breeding season. Highly migratory at least in the northern limits of its range. Can cross water; distribution on oceanic islands illustrates this owl's ability to migrate over vast expanses of ocean. Will feign death to avoid detection if camouflage fails. Both males and females bark, scream, whine, and give broken wing distraction displays when defending nests and young from potential threats. Short-eared owls and Northern Harriers often harass each other when hunting the same field, and harriers often steal food from this owl.

Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 5-6 eggs
Eggs: Short elliptical, cream/white, 1.5 x 1.2 inches
Incubation: 24-29 days
Fledge: 24-27 days
Disperse: 13-16 days

Courtship flight consists of song accompanied by aerial display including wing clapping. Male performs aerial display by rising quickly with rhythmic and exaggerated wing beats, hovering and giving courtship song, followed by a shallow stoop with 5-10 wing claps, and rising again, often 650-1300 feet above the ground. Flight can be ended with a spectacular descent where the male holds his wings aloft and shimmies rapidly to the ground. Nest is a scraped out depression on the ground lined with grass and feathers. Nests usually located on dry sites such as a slight ridge or mound, with enough vegetation cover to conceal the incubating female. Nests difficult to locate; females reluctant to flush until humans/predator are just a few feet from nest. In North America, clutch sizes range from 1-11 with an average of 5 or 6. Larger clutches are laid during years of food abundance. Clutch sizes also increase significantly with latitude. May lay replacement clutches. Southern populations may raise two broods in one year. Young leave nest at 14-18 days and wander on foot until fledged. This reduces the amount of time they are vulnerable to predation. Independent 1-2 weeks after fledging. Are able to breed in their first year. Monogamous, but polygamy suspected. Duration of pair bond not known, but presumed to be one breeding season. Reproduction and population dynamics of this species are closely linked to the density of its primary prey, small mammals such as *Microtus* voles.



Life Span

Longest recorded – 4 years 5 months.

Conservation Status

Not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the short-eared owl as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. The BLM considers this a Watch List species in Idaho – current population or habitat information suggests that this species may warrant sensitive species status in the future. This species has declined in many areas of North America and is listed as Endangered in Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania, and as a Species of Concern in Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia and Wyoming. Habitat loss – conversion of open habitats to agriculture, grazing, recreation, housing and resort development – is a key factor in the decline. As a ground-nester, it may also be vulnerable to increases in levels of predation and disturbance at nests by domestic and feral cats and dogs is known. Other mammalian predators include red fox and skunks. Known avian predators include gulls, jaegers, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Goshawk, Peregrine Falcon, Gyrfalcon, Red-tailed Hawk, Great Horned Owl, Snowy Owl, and Common Raven. Human caused mortality includes collisions with vehicles and aircraft. Illegal shooting does occur, but probably has little impact. Effects of trapping not known. Pesticides and other contaminants don't appear to be a problem for this species.

Viewing in the NCA

The short-eared owl is seen in the NCA year-round. However abundance depends of the availability of nesting habitat and prey.

Interesting Facts

Spanish name:

Lechuza de la penas

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *asio*, meaning a “horned” owl, and *flammeus* meaning fiery or flaming and refers to the appearance of the bird's plumage.
- Other names: bog owl, flat faced owl, grass owl, marsh owl, prairie owl.
- Ear openings vertically asymmetrical; left ear opening higher than right. Size and shape equal or nearly so. Asymmetrical ear openings allow owl to localize sound (prey) in both horizontal and vertical planes simultaneously and with same accuracy.

Sources

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Illustrations - courtesy of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development

Map - The Peregrine Fund

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