



Blue-listed species

are considered vulnerable because they have characteristics that make them particularly sensitive to human activities or natural events.

Short-eared Owl

Asio flammeus

At a Glance

The Short-eared Owl has tawny plumage with dark streaks on the underparts. When it flies, black patches can be seen near the bend of the underwings. It is a medium-sized owl, about the size of a crow, with a body length of 34 to 42 centimetres and a wingspan of about 100 centimetres. Males weigh around 315 grams. Females are about 65 grams heavier. This owl's short "ears" are really just tufts of feathers on top of its head, and are so small they can only be seen at very close range. The real ears are hidden under the feathers at the side of the head.

Short-eared Owls are mostly quiet birds, although when courting and nesting they make a variety of barking or yapping calls. They are most active at dawn and dusk, instead of at night like most other owls. They usually fly close to the ground, with flopping, erratic mothlike wingbeats. Sometimes they pause and hover before pouncing on their prey.

Home Sweet Home

"Home on the range" is a good description of the Short-eared Owl's preferred nesting sites. This species can be found in open spaces of many kinds, such as estuaries, grasslands, marshes, fields, tundra, alpine meadows and forest clearings. Nests are built on the ground by the female. They are usually located among grasses or other vegetation up to about 0.5 metres in height, or tall enough to hide an adult bird. The nest is no more than a shallow scrape, with a thin lining of leaves, grasses, and sometimes a few feathers.

This is the Life

In B.C., Short-eared Owls usually lay six or seven white eggs between April and June. In years when food is plentiful, they may lay as many as 13. The eggs are incubated mostly by the female and hatch in 23 to 29 days. While the female is incubating and brooding the young, the male keeps her supplied with food. The hatchlings develop very quickly. By the time they are 10 days old, they may weigh 10 times their hatching weight. They leave their nests 14 to 17 days after hatching, but are not ready to fly ("fledged") until about four weeks. Because they nest on the ground, the young owls learn to walk and run before they learn how to fly.

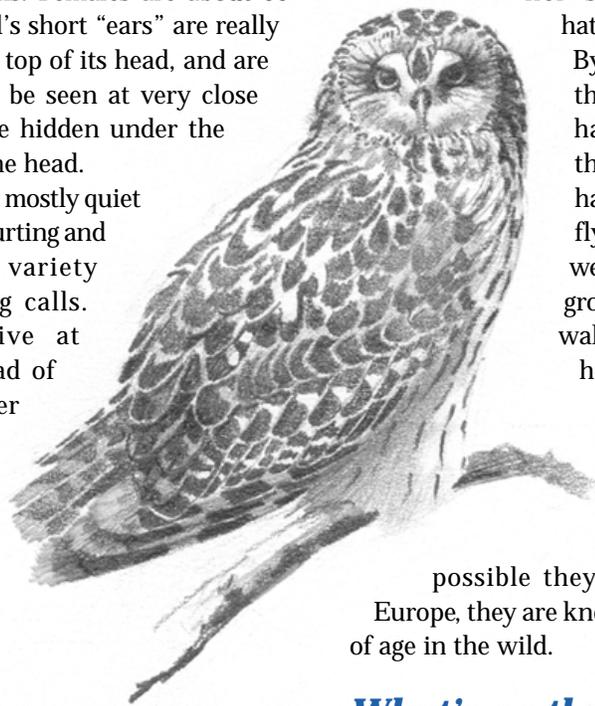
The oldest wild Short-eared Owl ever reported in North America was just four years and two months old, but it is possible they can live much longer. In Europe, they are known to reach at least 12 years of age in the wild.

What's on the Menu?

Small mammals, such as voles and mice, are their main foods. When these are in short supply, Short-eared Owls hunt other mammals, such as shrews, rats, rabbits and bats. Sometimes they eat birds, or insects like beetles and grasshoppers.

Where and When

Short-eared Owls live on every continent except Australia. They can be seen almost everywhere in North America except in the high Arctic. However, they do not breed farther south than California,





BRITISH COLUMBIA'S Wildlife at Risk

NO KIDDING!

Like most owls, the Short-eared Owl has one ear slightly higher than the other one. This enables it to be very accurate when using sound to locate prey in poor light.

Short-eared Owls clap their wings in flight as part of their elaborate courtship display. This is known as "sky-dancing."

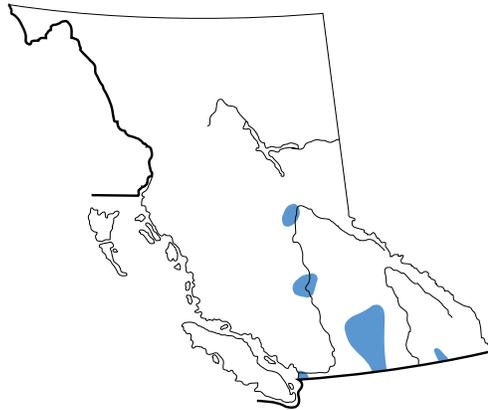
A Short-eared Owl was once seen to dive deliberately into a pond, then "row" to shore using its wings, to distract an observer away from its nest.

Short-eared Owls like to sunbathe, facing the sun with eyes closed and wings spread.

Short-eared Owls nesting on tidal marshes have been known to move their eggs or young to higher ground to save them from unusually high tides.

In winter, Short-eared Owls sometimes roost together in large flocks of 100 birds or more.

■ **Present range of the Short-eared Owl in British Columbia**



Idaho, Kansas, Ohio and Vermont. Short-eared Owls are found year round in British Columbia. They have been known to nest here in grasslands, marshes and parklands in such places as Creston, the southern Okanagan valley, the Thompson and Chilcotin-Cariboo basins up to Prince George, and the Fraser Valley from Fort Langley to the Fraser River delta. Farther north, breeding pairs are widely scattered in subalpine meadows. The Fraser River delta is the main wintering area in B.C.

How They're Doing

Short-eared Owl populations are declining in some regions of North America, including parts of British Columbia. The main reason they are becoming less common in B.C. is that more and more of their habitat is being developed for urban, agricultural and recreational uses. This decreases the availability of prey as well as of nesting habitat. Domestic cats that run wild and hunt small rodents also reduce the amount of food available for owls. And they must compete with other birds of prey. Also, nests can be lost to farm machinery and cattle trampling.

Much of the Short-eared Owl's habitat is privately owned and is likely to be developed in the future. One of the areas of greatest concern is the wintering areas of the Fraser River delta.

The Short-eared Owl is considered vulnerable and has been placed on B.C.'s

Blue List. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) has designated this species as Vulnerable.

How We're Helping

It is difficult to prevent development of privately owned land, but some things can be done to help. For example, farmers are encouraged to leave some of their fields unplanted with crops each year, so there will be more suitable nesting and hunting habitat for Short-eared Owls. They can also help by delaying harvesting of hayfields or access of cattle until after the owl's nesting season.

Short-eared Owls are protected under the British Columbia Wildlife Act.

How You Can Help

Above all, Short-eared Owls need undisturbed areas with a reliable supply of prey. Keep cats, dogs and cattle (and yourself!) away from suitable habitat if Short-eared Owls are present.

You can find out more about the Wildlife Branch and Conservation Data Centre at:

<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/>

Conservation Data Centre
Resources Inventory Branch
Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks
P.O. Box 9344 Stn Prov Gov
Victoria, B.C. V8W 9M1

Wildlife Branch
Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks
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