

The Long and the Short of It
By Wayne Laubscher

There are two species of owls in Pennsylvania that probably many people other than naturalists and birdwatchers have never heard of: the Long-eared Owl and the Short-eared Owl. These two species are not well known because they are both rare spring nesting species and uncommon to rare wintering species in the commonwealth. Although they are closely related, they differ in their appearance, habitat preferences, and behavior.

Long-eared Owls (*Asio otus*) are listed as threatened in Pennsylvania. They are about 15 inches in length with a wingspan of about 3 feet. When perched, the long ear tufts (not ears) are noticeable. They resemble the much larger Great Horned Owl but have vertical stripes on the belly, black coloring around the eyes, and orange color on the face. In flight, dark "wrist patches" can be seen. They rarely vocalize but sometimes give short hoots.

These owls are strictly nocturnal- active only at night. They nest and roost in wooded areas and hunt in open areas and edges. They are migratory. Winter roosts are in dense conifers and often communal with sometimes many individuals occupying one roost. Roosting owls will perch motionless with erect ear tufts. Long-eared Owls are very shy and roosts are highly susceptible to disturbance which could cause them to be abandoned.

If one is lucky enough to encounter Long-eared Owls, one must avoid close approach and view from a distance. Allowing public knowledge of them will certainly be detrimental to these birds. However, the Pennsylvania Game Commission would appreciate such information as it would be very helpful in the owls' protection.

Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus*) are listed as endangered in Pennsylvania and documented as a very rare nesting species here. Body length is about 15 inches with an average wingspan of 40 inches. The eyes show dark circles. Plumage color varies from light to dark brown, with dark "wrist marks" easily seen during flight. The ear tuft feathers are short. Their flight is low and bouncy over fields and open areas, often described as moth-like. Several can often be seen flying together, when they can be quite vocal making "puppy dog" like barks.

Their habitats are grassy fields which are not mowed, meadows, wetlands, reclaimed strip mines, and even airports. Short-eared Owls nest on the ground in weeds or grasses.

They are generally crepuscular, that is, they are active primarily at dusk and dawn but sometimes during the day. They share the same habitat as Northern Harriers and interactions between the two species as daylight fades are quite entertaining. These owls also are migratory. In the fall and winter look for this species in these habitats.

Both Long-eared and Short-eared Owls are in serious declines for the same reasons. Loss of appropriate habitat due to development, logging, and increased intensive agricultural practices has been taking a significant toll on these fascinating birds. Vehicle collisions, poisonings from rodenticides, and human disturbance have had a serious effect as well.

Photos by the Author

