

Watch for Short-Eared Owls this Winter

By Linda Stager

February is an excellent time for seasoned birders and casual nature enthusiasts to watch for one of Pennsylvania's more delightful raptors, the elusive short-eared owl. Among our state's winter visitors, these enigmatic owls stand out not only for their beauty but also for their intriguing behavior.

Understanding the Short-Eared Owl

The short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*) is a captivating medium-sized raptor with its unique features and adaptable behavior. Sporting a mottled brown and buff plumage, this bird is perfectly camouflaged against the winter landscape. One of the owl's distinctive characteristics is the presence of small ear tufts, which, though not always visible, have earned it its name.

Unlike many other owls, the short-eared owl is sometimes active during the day, especially during the late afternoon and early evening.

Habitat and Behavior

This fascinating owl prefers open areas such as grasslands, meadows, marshes, and agricultural fields. They are frequently found in regions with expansive open spaces. These somewhat rare owls primarily feed on small mammals, such as voles and mice, which they hunt by flying low over the ground and using their acute sense of hearing to detect prey.

One of the most lyrical aspects of the short-eared owl's behavior is its buoyant, moth-like flight. Observers often see these owls gliding gracefully over fields, occasionally hovering before diving to capture their prey. Adding to the allure are its vocalizations, which include an occasional and intriguing "bark."

Short-eared owls in Pennsylvania are migratory for the most part. They are here from December to March before heading north to their breeding grounds again. They often roost on the ground among the weeds or in rock piles in a field.

According to the Pennsylvania Game Commission, the short-eared owl remains on the state's endangered species list because of its small breeding population and limited distribution and is protected.

Tips for Successful Owl Watching

To increase your chances of spotting short-eared owls in Pennsylvania, consider the following tips:

- **Timing:** Short-eared owls are most active around dawn and dusk. Plan your visits then to prime locations for the best viewing opportunities
- **Quiet Observation:** Owls are sensitive to disturbances. Approach viewing areas quietly and minimize noise to avoid scaring them away. If possible, stay in your vehicle off the side of the road. Vehicles make good mobile blinds.
- **Binoculars, Long lenses, and Scopes:** Bring a good pair of binoculars or a spotting scope to get a closer look at the owls without disturbing them. These tools will help you observe their behavior and plumage details from a distance.
- **Photographers:** it's best to use a camera with low-light capabilities and a long telephoto lens, preferably 600mm or longer. If outside your vehicle, a tripod or monopod also helps with steadiness at low shutter speeds.
- **Dress Appropriately:** February can be quite cold in Pennsylvania. To stay comfortable during your bird-watching excursions: dress in layers and wear warm, waterproof clothing. Hats, gloves, and good boots are also a must.
- **Patience:** Wildlife observation requires patience. Spend time scanning the open fields and listening for owl calls. Sometimes, the best sightings happen when you least expect them.
- **Join Local Birding Groups:** Consider joining local birding clubs or online communities. Experienced birders can provide valuable insights into recent owl sightings and share tips on the best spots and times for observation.

Contributing to Conservation

Watching short-eared owls in their natural habitat is a rewarding experience and an opportunity to contribute to their conservation. These owls face habitat loss and degradation threats, making it essential to support conservation efforts.

One way to help is to participate in volunteer projects, such as the annual Christmas Bird Count or the Great Backyard Bird Count. These initiatives collect valuable data on bird populations and distribution, aiding conservationists in protecting these magnificent creatures.

Additionally, supporting local conservation organizations and advocating for the preservation of open spaces can make a significant difference. By ensuring that the

habitats of short-eared owls and other wildlife are protected, we can continue to enjoy the beauty and wonder of these birds for generations to come.

A Memorable Experience

Whether you're an avid birder or simply looking to connect with nature, watching for short-eared owls in Pennsylvania this February promises to be a memorable experience. The thrill of spotting these majestic raptors and the tranquility of winter landscapes creates a unique and enriching adventure.

So, bundle up, grab your binoculars, and head out to the fields and meadows – the short-eared owls are waiting to be discovered.

All photos by the author:



