



# Short-eared Owl Facts



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## Identification

Short-eared owls are medium-sized owls with small ear tufts on the top of the head. They have round, beige facial discs, and white/buff (male) or tawny/rust (female) underparts streaked with brown. In flight, the long wings show a buff patch above and a black wrist mark and tip below. The short-eared owl appears big-headed and neck-less in its buoyant, moth-like flight. Its voice sounds like the nasal bark of a dog, “wak, wak.”

## Life History

Short-eared owls are most often seen in the late afternoon and at dawn or dusk. They primarily eat small mammals, but occasionally take small birds; their young sometimes eat insects. When hunting, these owls dive from perches or fly low over the ground and pounce on their prey from above.

These birds prefer the open country of grasslands and marshes, inhabiting areas where small mammals are plentiful. Their population changes, breeding behaviors and nest success change from year to year based on their food supply. Breeding occurs in March through June. Their courtship entails elaborate flight displays that include wing-clapping, exaggerate wing beats and scuffles.



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The shallow, unlined nest of the short-eared owl is built on the ground, sheltered by tall grass, reeds or bushes. The short, oval eggs are laid in 2-day intervals; the female incubates the eggs, beginning with the first egg, for 24 to 28 days. After hatching, the female tends the nest while the male brings food. The young owls leave the nest 12 to 17 days after hatching, but do not fly until 10 days later.

In winter, short-eared owls gather in open habitats, such as open grasslands, marshes, landfills, and fallow fields, that support large numbers of small mammals, especially meadow voles. The owls will stay in their wintering grounds unless deep snow and ice reduce the availability of prey, then they may leave to find a more suitable place to finish out the winter. In areas where food remains plentiful into the spring and summer, short-eared owls may take advantage of these favorable conditions and stay to breed.



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## Range

Short-eared owls are found on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. New York is the southern edge of this owl's breeding range. Northern populations are believed to be highly migratory,, and there is a noticeable increase in the number of short-eared owls in New York in the fall and spring, but they are more common in New York in winter.

## Status

Short-eared owls are Endangered in New York State. Their conservation depends on protecting relatively large, opens sites that support small rodents. Doing so will likely have the added benefit of protecting other imperiled grassland birds with similar habitat requirements.

Recent efforts have been made to more closely monitor wintering raptors in New York State, including at Montezuma. Research has lead to a better understanding of the importance of wintering raptor concentration areas to short-eared owls, and their response to changes in habitat and environmental conditions.

Information gathered through research and monitoring will help guide conservation efforts for this and other grassland species.



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## Interesting Facts

- While caring for its young, a short-eared owl will perform an "injured bird" act to lead away intruders.
- During courtship, male short-eared owls will fly high over the nest, calling, flapping, soaring and occasionally swooping while clapping its wings below its body.
- Short-eared owls generally roost on low perches or on the ground.
- While short-eared owls dine on small mammals and an occasional small bird, they prefer meadow voles.