

# Species Sheets: Great Gray Owl



photo by Milo Burcham ©

**Common name:** Great Gray Owl

**Latin Name:** *Strix nebulosa*

**Field Marks:** Length 27 inches  
Wing span 52 inches



**H**uge-looking owl that is mostly feathers. Large round head, fluffy feathers, and long wings and tail give appearance of huge body size, but actually smaller by weight than Great Horned Owl. Large facial disk with dark rings and white “mustache” make yellow eyes look small and “staring”. Overall gray with dark markings. Wing beats slow and deep. May be easily approached by people. Lives across Northern Hemisphere

## Habitat:

Coniferous forest and mixed coniferous-deciduous forest for roosting and nesting, often aspen forest for nesting. Plus nearby meadow clearings and bogs for hunting.

## Behavior:

Relatively small feet so prey is mostly voles, perhaps 90% during breeding season. Also pocket gophers, mice, shrews, squirrels, hares and some birds, especially in winter. Nocturnal, diurnal and crepuscular. May use tree tops, snags, fence posts to listen and watch when hunting. Will fly low across openings to swoop down on prey.

## Vocalization:

Booming deep hoots, lower pitched by male.

Evenly spaced then getting slightly faster and weaker at end of series. Also a softer double call, perhaps to defend territory around nest.

## Nest and eggs:

Uses abandoned stick nests of other birds like raven, goshawk, or broken off top of snag, hollow in stump. 3-5 eggs, maybe up to 9 with large vole numbers. Allopreening important in pair bonding. Female **very** aggressive in guarding nest after young hatch, and readily attacks intruders.

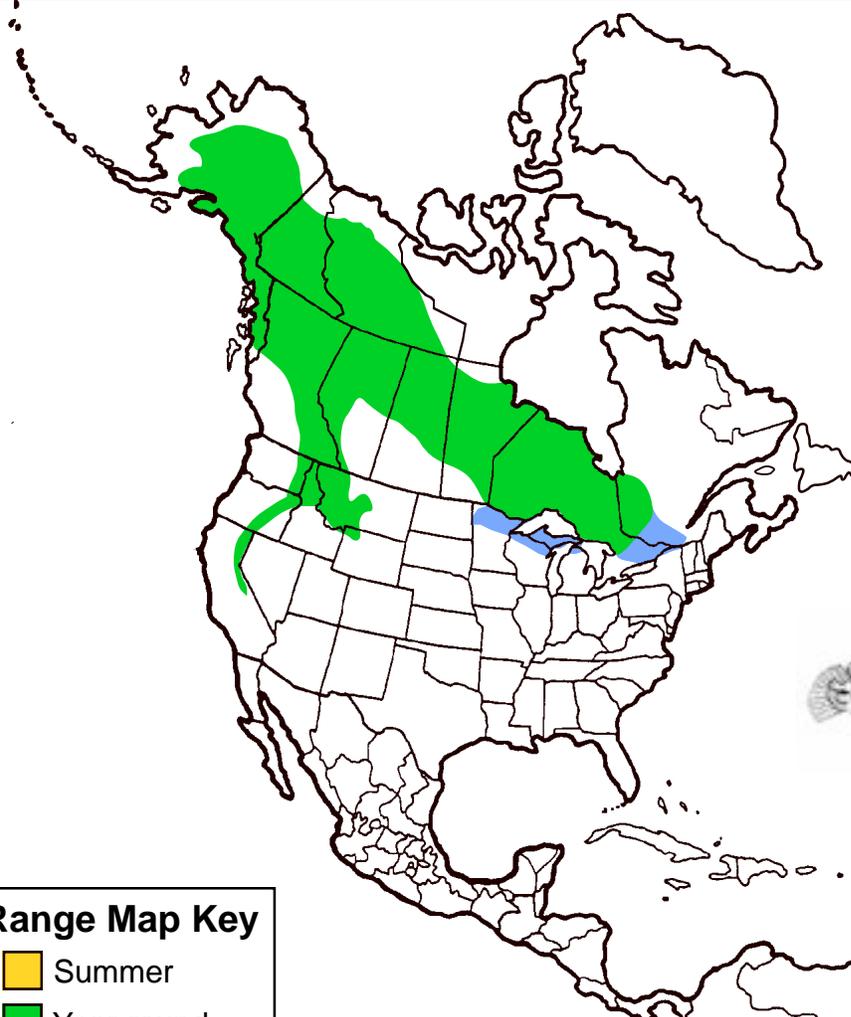
## Movement:

Resident and stable in some areas and years. Will move south in times of poor prey numbers, or “irruption” years.

## Interesting Fact:

The Great Gray has the largest facial disk of any owl. This makes a perfect circle that may help it to hear better than most. Will readily plunge into snow depths of up to a foot and a half head first, grabbing subsurface rodents with talons using their keen hearing. They can break through a hard crust of snow for their prey. Will also capture pocket gophers by punching through dirt.

# Range Map: Great Gray Owl



Great-gray Owl, Copyright © Milo Burcham



These maps are designed to show the general limits of occurrence. Within those limits, each species will likely be found only in appropriate habitat.

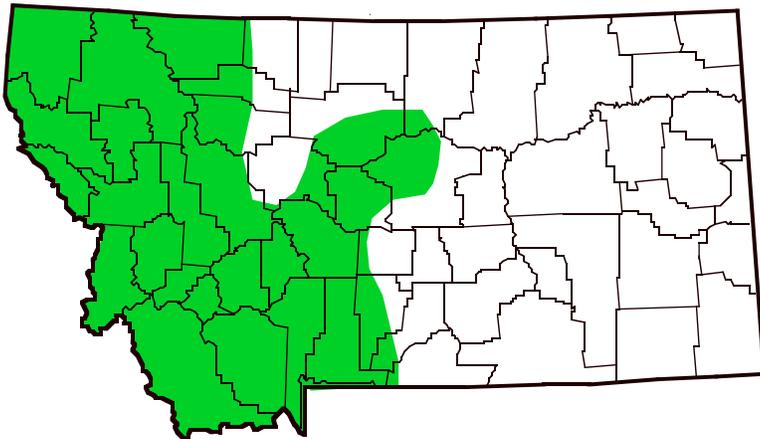
**Range Map Key**

-  Summer
-  Year-round
-  Winter

scale: 1 inch = 1,000 miles



## Raptor Range in Montana



Montana range maps are based on the Montana Bird Distribution data.