

Species Sheets: Short-eared Owl



photo by Kate Davis ©

Common name: Short-eared Owl

Latin Name: *Asio flammeus*

Field Marks: Length 15 inches
Wing span 38 inches



Medium-sized, buffy-brown owl of open country. Cryptic coloration looks like dead grass. Round head with small ear tufts seen only in defensive posture, located near center of “forehead”. Yellow eyes surrounded by black. Light bellow with brown streaks. In flight, long, broad wings held in slight dihedral, dark patch at wrist. Low, bouncing flight, like a big moth. Low wing loading, so capable of slow, quiet flight while hunting. Male slightly paler than female. Roost on ground, or in low vegetation. Communal roosting common in winter with numbers from several to over a hundred on ground together. Present all across the world except Australia, a very successful species.

Habitat:

Fields, marshes, farmland, prairie, tundra.

Behavior:

Diet 95% small mammals, mostly voles, plus mice, shrews, pocket gophers. Few small birds. Nocturnal, diurnal and crepuscular, hunting at all hours. Male performs “sky dance” over breeding territory. Will circle up and dive down clapping wings below, visible from a great distance. Adults will feign a broken wing, and crash into brush to lure predators away from nest.

Vocalization:

Usually quiet, but may “bark” year-round when disturbed. Male “sings” in flight during courtship, a series of up to 16 “hoo-hoo-hoo...” notes.

Nest and eggs:

Nest on ground where female may be hidden in grasses. Nearly unique for owls in that a nest is made with female adding grass and downy feathers to form a shallow bowl. Eggs 5-10. Larger clutch size when vole numbers are high. Young leave nest on foot before able to fly to perhaps reduce discovery of nest by ground predators like foxes and skunks.

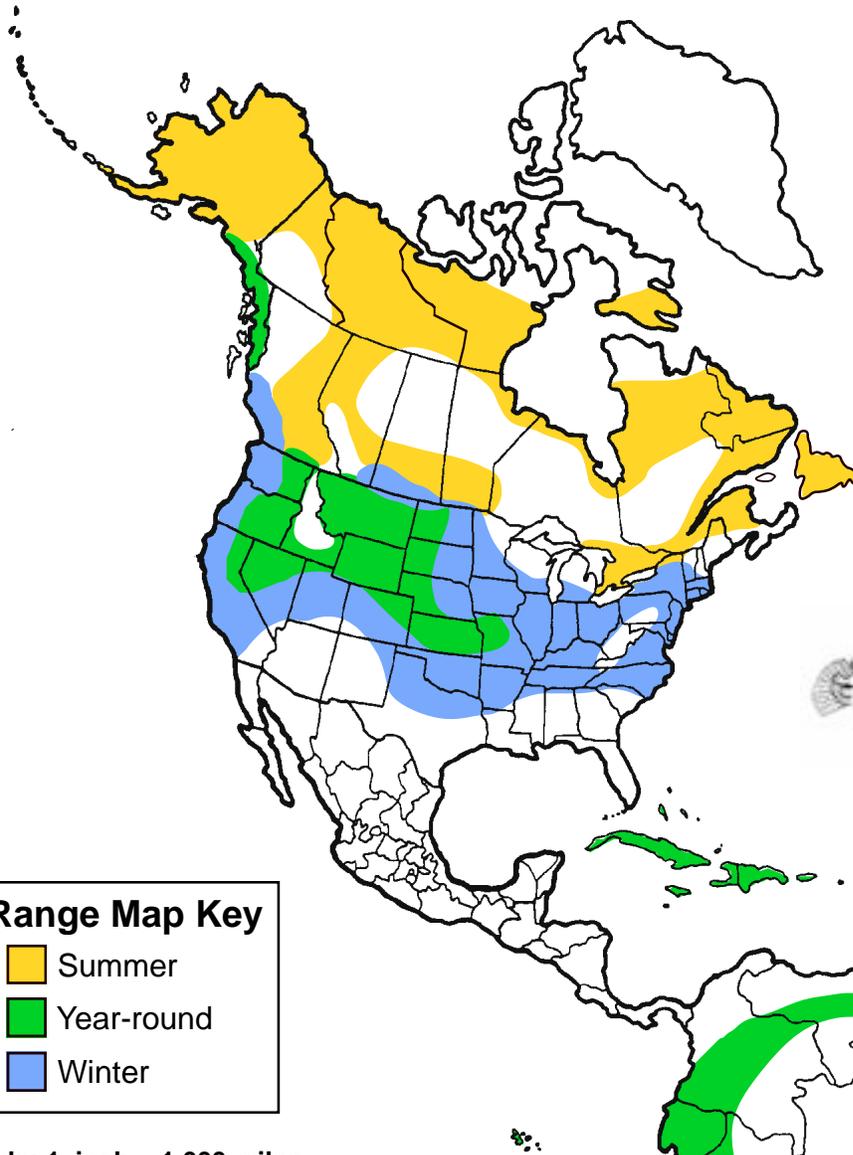
Movement:

Dispersal of young, and nomadic seeking prey in which owls move in all directions. True migration occurs, and some remain on breeding grounds when sufficient food supplies exist. Northern-most breeders always move south.

Interesting Fact:

Large clutch size in times of numerous prey doesn't always mean survival of all. If prey numbers drop during breeding season, the oldest offspring may eat the youngest. With these birds there may be a two week difference in age. This is called “siblicide” and may help ensure that some nest-mates are successful.

Range Map: Short-eared Owl



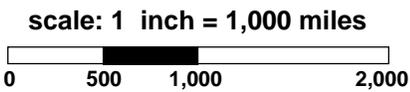
Short-eared Owl. Copyright © Kate Davis



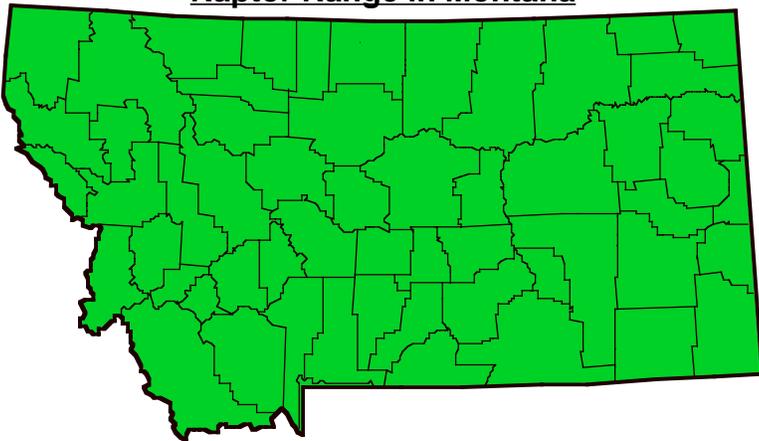
These maps are designed to show the general limits of occurrence. Within those limits, each species will likely be found only in appropriate habitat.

Range Map Key

- Summer
- Year-round
- Winter



Raptor Range in Montana



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