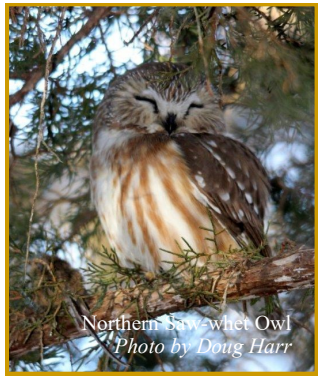
***Short-eared Owl* (state endangered)**
This medium sized owl is built similarly to its Long-eared cousin, but has tiny ear-tufts that are difficult to observe. Historically, Short-eared Owls were a common ground nester in Iowa's open grasslands, especially in areas where Northern Harriers were known to breed, but this habitat has largely disappeared as prairies were converted into agricultural land. Now this species is mostly a winter visitor, inhabiting larger grassland complexes in southern and western Iowa where there is abundant small mammal prey. If you're near open prairie habitat, you may see Short-eared Owls foraging during daylight hours, a habit that separates this species from many other owls.


Short-eared Owl
Photo by Dan Dzurisnin

Northern Saw-whet Owl
The smallest of Iowa's owls at only 3 oz, Northern Saw-whets are a common winter visitor. They can be found in a variety of wooded habitats, but prefer dense vegetation—particularly conifers— in which to roost. Unlike many Iowa owls that swallow their prey whole, Northern Saw-whet Owls consume their prey— primarily woodland mice— in pieces over several meals. This owl species is often perceived as "tame" because it usually does not move once discovered, even if approached. However, it is best to keep a respectful distance when viewing all wildlife to prevent unnecessary stress to the animal.


Northern Saw-whet Owl
Photo by Doug Harr

***Burrowing Owl* (continued on back)**
Although small bodied, the long legs of this species give them a tall appearance. As their name suggests, Burrowing Owls nest and roost in burrows, often those dug by prairie dogs, badgers, or other mammals.

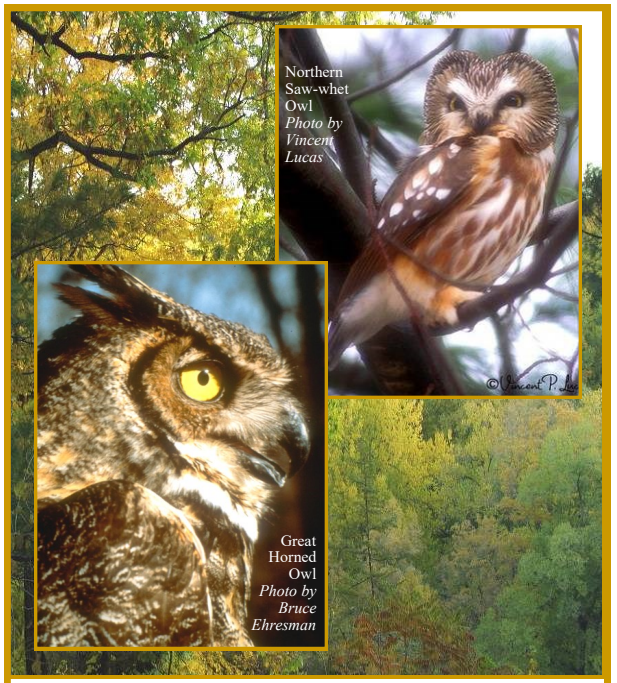
(Continued from front)
This species hunts both day and night by walking along the ground searching for insects, like dung beetles, or small mammals. Because they prefer dry open areas with no trees and short grasses, only a few spots in the state have suitable habitat for this rare Iowa nester. As such, Burrowing Owls are usually only a casual visitor that few are fortunate to see.


Burrowing Owl
Photo by Vincent Lucas

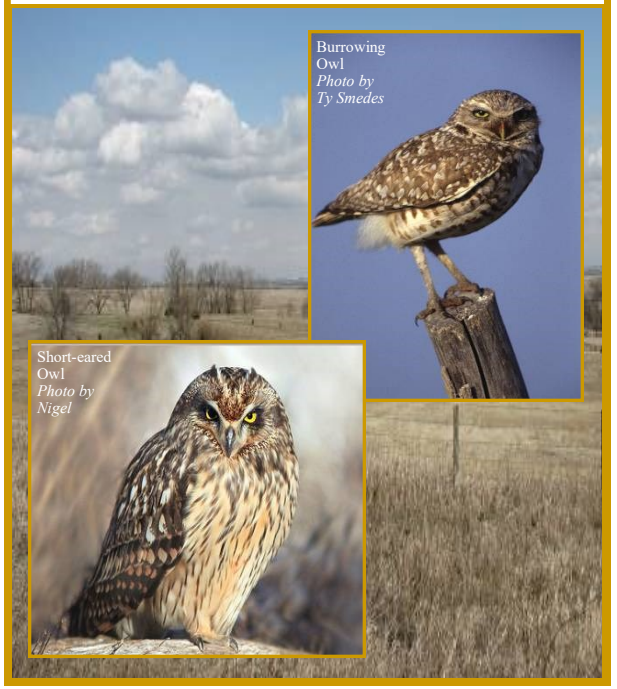
Iowa Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife Diversity Program
1436 255th St.
Boone, IA 50036
Phone: (515) 725 –8200

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Edited by Natalie Randall with assistance from Bruce Ehresman, Shane Patterson, and Stephanie Shepherd
2012


Northern Saw-whet Owl
Photo by Vincent Lucas
Great Horned Owl
Photo by Bruce Ehresman

Owls of Iowa


Burrowing Owl
Photo by Ty Smedes
Short-eared Owl
Photo by Nigel

Owls

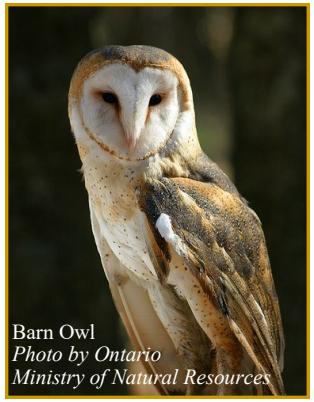
Owls are birds of prey that have several distinctive characters and behaviors. Their tell-tale circular facial disc works like a satellite, capturing sounds to help them detect the position of their prey. Being primarily nocturnal, most owls have large eyes and superior night vision for hunting. The feather fringe on the trailing edge and serrations on the leading edge of an owl's wing, coupled with a covering of soft, noise-absorbing feathers, reduces air resistance and makes an owl's flight very quiet. This phenomenon, known as "silent flight", allows an owl to sneak up on its prey undetected. Many owls will swallow small prey items (such as mice and voles) whole and later regurgitate a "pellet" containing the indigestible bones and hair. Favorite roosting sites of some owl species can be identified by the presence of pellets littering the ground below. Another trait common among Iowa's nesting owl species is that they do not build their own nests, but instead rely on hollow tree cavities, old hawk or crow nests, or ground burrows excavated by another animal.

In Iowa, there are nine different regularly to casually occurring owl species that can be found in an assortment of habitats and during various times of the year. A description and information about each follows.

Family Tytonidae:

***Barn Owl* (state endangered)**

This medium-sized buffy owl has a unique heart-shaped face, light underparts, and long legs. Barn Owls are not considered common in Iowa, which is the northern extent of their range. However, nesting pairs are still reported annually, mostly across the lower half of the state. Barn Owls' preferred nesting sites include old wooden barns (for which they're named!) and large tree cavities. This species also depends on grassland and wet meadow habitat for their dietary staple here in Iowa: Meadow and Prairie Voles.

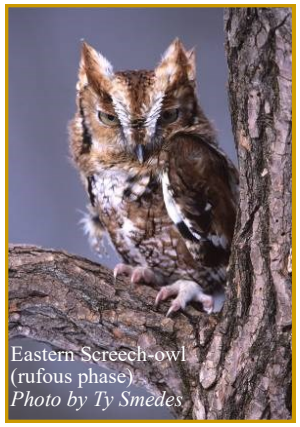


Barn Owl
Photo by Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources

Family Strigidae:

Eastern Screech-owl

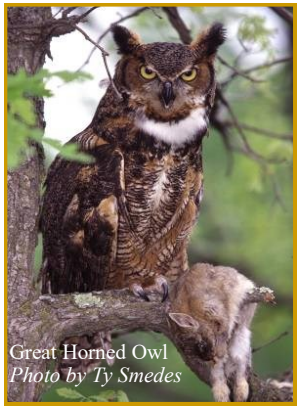
This small, short-tailed, broad-winged owl can be found year-round in Iowa. Known for their variable color, the plumage of this species can range from gray to brown to rufous. Like many owls, screech-owls often roost in a tree during the day, usually on a branch near the trunk in dense foliage. If this owl perceives a threat, it will stretch its body and stiffen its feathers to disguise itself as another branch. Prey taken by screech-owls includes mice, moles, shrews, and even small snakes, frogs, and insects.



Eastern Screech-owl (rufous phase)
Photo by Ty Smedes

Great Horned Owl

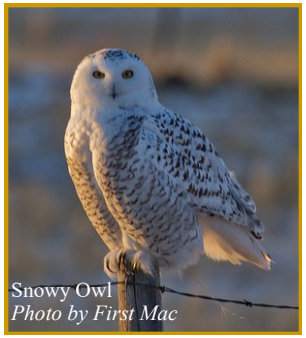
This large owl resident of Iowa gets its name from the pair of feather tufts ("plumicorns") on its head, which resemble horns or cat-like ears. The song of a Great Horned Owl asks the classic "who? who?" that many people associate with owls, their full vocalization being "hoo hoohoo hoooo hoo". During evening and nighttime hours, this species will hunt for prey along forest edges, woods, and fields for rabbits, squirrels, smaller owls, and even skunks! In winter, Great Horned Owls will sometimes cache leftover or excess prey. When hungry, they will "incubate" their frozen cache until it is thawed enough to consume.



Great Horned Owl
Photo by Ty Smedes

Snowy Owl

Snowy Owls, North America's largest owl species, are sporadic winter visitors in Iowa. And are active during the day This bird breeds in the arctic tundra and its nesting success is often tied to the availability of lemmings, their primary prey source. A scarcity of lemmings at the onset of winter may prompt "irruptions" of Snowy Owls southward into the northern U.S. and Great Plains states (which likely resemble the tundra habitat from which they originated). Here, they may spend the winter in search of better food resources.



Snowy Owl
Photo by First Mac

Barred Owl

This is a medium-sized stocky gray owl with large dark eyes and Iowa's most common owl species. A year-round Iowa resident, Barred Owls prefer mature forests and wooded waterways for roosting and nesting. Mice constitute the majority of this owl's diet, but they also eat other small mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates. This owl is primarily nocturnal but can also be active during the day. Their characteristic vocalization, "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you -all?" can be heard in late winter when Barred Owls are establishing their nesting territory.



Barred Owl
Photo by Carl Kurtz

Long-eared Owl

Although similar in coloration to Great Horned Owls, Long-eared Owls are smaller and, true to their name, have longer ear tufts. This species is usually just a winter visitor in Iowa, as the state lacks their preferred nesting habitat of dense conifer stands adjacent to open grasslands. Long-eared Owls usually take over old crow, hawk, or squirrel nests for their own, but may occasionally nest in a tree cavity, too. Unlike most owls, Long-eared Owls will often roost communally, and may return to a select few winter roost sites year after year.



Long-eared Owl
Photo by Ty Smedes