

ACTIVITIES, TIPS AND EVENTS FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

Go Calling Under the Owl Moon

February's full moon is nicknamed the owl moon, as the crisp night air is filled with the calls and hoots of mating owls.

Crunch the snow and trek into the woods with a child—or the young at heart—to practice calling owls. Use the moonlight reflecting off the snow-covered ground to illuminate the surroundings as you follow the sound of an owl's call. Move slowly and patiently to glimpse owls silhouetted on leafless trees by shimmering moonbeams. When an owl calls, try to mimic the sound and see if you get a response. All eight species of Iowa owls are found here in the winter. The great horned, screech and barred owls are most common. The short-eared is on the state endangered species list and the barn and long-eared are on the threatened list. If you glimpse one of these, you are lucky indeed.



◀ **Barred**—**VERY COMMON**, most often heard in summer, spring and fall. Search along forested areas in river bottoms across the state, except northwest Iowa.

Screech—**COMMON**. Small, but slightly larger than a saw-whet owl. Found year-round in Iowa. Nocturnal, but will respond to calls day or night. Nests early spring and summer.

Burrowing—**THE ONLY OWL THAT NESTS UNDERGROUND**, often using old badger or fox dens. Most recorded sightings are in northwest Iowa.

Short-eared—**ENDANGERED. A PRAIRIE SPECIES, FIND THEM HUNTING OVER OPEN GRASSLANDS**. A summer nester and one of the last to nest. "We have a small breeding number during the summer, but more short-ears are in Iowa during the winter, when they move south from prairie areas in Canada," says Doug Harr, who heads the DNR's nongame program.

FULL MOON SCHEDULE

JANUARY 30 – MOONRISE 6:26 P.M.

FEBRUARY 28 – MOONRISE 6:31 P.M.

Great Horned—THE LARGEST AND EASIEST OWL

TO FIND, they hoot in a series of five or six in late December and January to attract mates. By following the sound, you can see them sitting in an old red-tailed hawk nest, incubating eggs, even during a snowstorm. Often lay eggs by early February. Their owlets take a long time to mature, so they are the earliest nesters, doing so to take advantage of an early food supply for their young. Owlets can hunt on their own by summer, perfect timing to catch early populations of rabbits and rodents.

Long-eared—THREATENED. FIND IN CONIFER GROVES IN WINTER AND SOMETIMES IN GROUPS. The only owls that form flocks. Usually found in the same location year after year.

Snowy—NOT HERE DURING SUMMER, when the all-white snowy resides in the Arctic. “They come down when the food base of lemmings and mice has a population crash,” says Harr. That happens about every four years. “Not responsive to calls, you will just happen upon them sitting on a fencepost or on a frozen clod of dirt in an open field. A ground nester, they like to get on a perch to scan for prey.” Most are found north of Interstate 80.

Northern Saw-Whet—OUR SMALLEST OWL, “Probably a lot more common than we realize, this owl is very secretive,” says Harr. Often found in winter in red cedar trees. They perch close to tree trunks and sometimes close to the ground. Unafraid of people, they can be approached within a few feet. “This is a species that we are just starting to understand more about,” says Harr.

Barn Owl—RARE, with less than ten known nests in the state. “There are probably more than that, but they are hard to find,” says Harr. An oak savannah species, they thrived when fire and natural free-roaming grazers such as elk kept the forest floor open, with knee-high grasses. A rare and quickly disappearing habitat, the oak forests are now often choked with above-head tangles of brush and woody plants. Barn owls have a distinctive heart-shaped facial shape. Often found in abandoned barns, they are a year-round resident and a spring and summer nester.

GET ONLINE, LISTEN, HEAD OUTSIDE

Children and adults will enjoy listening to various owl calls online. Visit the famed Cornell Lab of Ornithology at www.birds.cornell.edu and search for owls.





Great Horned Owl, incubating eggs in nest



Screech Owl

AMAZING OWL FACTS

FEATHER TUFTS VERSUS REAL EARS

What appear to be ears are merely tufts of feathers. The actual ear opening is on the side of the head, well below the tufts. Unique to owls, the ear holes are not even, with one slightly higher than the other. Sound reaches the ears at separate times. "This allows the brain to find the exact location of prey by the microsecond difference in receiving sound," says Harr. The offset ears are most pronounced in night-hunting owls, when an owl positions the head so sound reaches both ears simultaneously, its prey is lined up with its face.

SATELLITE DISH-SHAPED HEAD

The distinctive disk-shaped face has purpose. Bowl-shaped feathers collect and focus sound to aid hearing, much like a satellite dish collects and concentrates television signals.

GREAT EYES AND NECK

Oversized owl eyes are so large they cannot move in the eye socket. Humans can roll their eyes, a trick an owl cannot do. Unlike most birds, both eyes face forward, not set on the sides of the head. Lacking eye movement, their neck compensates, able to rotate each way 180 degrees for nearly a 360 degree field of vision.

GREAT MOUSE CHASE

One owl can eat nearly 80 pounds of mice a year—that's nearly 13,000 mice over 10 years.

STEALTH AIRCRAFT

A special feather design eliminates the whistling sound of air passing over the wing so they can fly in complete silence.

BEFORE YOU TAKE A CHILD

Read *OWL MOON*, the story of a father who takes his young daughter owling—calling for great horned owls in the night. The trees stand still as statues and the world is silent as a dream. *Whoo-whoo-whooo*, the father calls to the mysterious nighttime bird. Distinguished author Jane Yolen has created a gentle, poetic story that lovingly depicts the special companionship of a young child and her father, as well as humankind's close relationship to the natural world. Wonderfully complemented by John Schoenherr's award-winning, soft watercolor illustrations, this is a verbal and visual treasure.

Snuggle up inside and read *Owl Moon*, then bundle up and head outside to try to call owls yourself. Check your local library, favorite bookseller or order online. ISBN 978-0399214578

