

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Long-eared and Short-eared Owls

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Fall migration is still moving ahead in our area and the early parts of October hold an unseen migration. This nocturnal migration is undertaken by owls! Right now, Northern Saw-whet Owls are migrating in good numbers. For today's post, however, let's take a look at two other species of highly migratory owls: Long-eared and Short-eared Owls!

Long-eared and Short-eared Owls are two the most widespread species of owl in the world. You can find both species throughout most of North America and Europe, as well as parts of South America and Asia. Short-eared Owls have even colonized islands far away from land, unlike their cousin the Long-eared Owl which is more of a landlocked species. Both species do nest in Minnesota and can be seen in the Sax-Zim Bog.

These owls belong to the genus *Asio*, which is a fairly broad reaching genus of owl, with representatives in the tropics of South America, Caribbean Islands, Africa, and parts of east Asia. This widespread group of owls uses a wide variety of habitat types,

from open grasslands and marshes, to forest edges, and even dense forests. The Asio owls share a similar body plan, different than other familiar owl groups. They have long, narrow wings, slender bodies, and slim facial disks. The Asio owls are referred to as the "eared owls." This "eared" moniker refers to the plumicorns prominent on nearly all species in this group. Plumicorns are the long tufts of feathers atop the heads of many owl species, often seen when owls are agitated or trying to hide when roosting. Even though they are called ears, these feather tufts play no role in the owl's hearing.

The long wings of these owls are interesting. Most owls have relatively broad wings, that are not much longer than their bodies are tall. Long-eared and Short-eared Owls both have very long and somewhat narrow wings. This adaptation helps them fly long distances and maintain active flight when hunting. Both Long-eared and Short-eared Owls are active hunters and can often be seen at dusk or during the day hunting over marshes, grasslands, and along forest edges. Most of the other owl species in Minnesota are perch hunters, listening for prey in a passive way before pouncing. The bouncing flight of both Long-eared and Short-eared Owls is very distinct and their long wings mean they are excellent long-distance fliers. Long-eared Owls in our area may migrate as far south as Mexico! Short-eared Owls are no slouches either, when it comes to migration distance. A study of migrating Short-eared Owls from Alaska documented migration distances of some banded birds approaching 4,400 miles!

Long-eared Owls are one of five species of owl that nest in the Sax-Zim Bog and are a species that we detect regularly on our Spring Owl Surveys. Nests are occasionally found, but this species is rarely seen during the summer months. Short-eared Owls do not nest in our area and are fairly uncommon, even in migration. Fall migration is probably the best time to encounter these species in our area, though, your odds are still quite low. Both Long-eared and Short-eared Owls are searching for small mammal prey and Short-eared Owls are considered to be vole specialists (much like Great Gray Owls!).

More information can be found in the photos below!

(Photos by Sparky Stensaas)



Long-eared Owls often roost in groups during migration. This bird may be perched by itself, but there is a very famous Long-eared Owl roosting site in Serbia that holds over 600 Long-eared Owls during the winter months.



Long-eared Owls are one of five species of owl that nest in the Sax-Zim Bog. This species prefers habitats near open areas, which they use for hunting. Like most owls, Long-eared Owls do not make their own nests and use old nests of Corvids (like crows, ravens, and magpies), as well as witches brooms (the dense growths of branches made in response by the tree after a mistletoe infection).



This Long-eared Owl has relaxed its plumicorns, though you can still see them on top of its head. Very similar to Great Horned Owls, Long-eared Owls are much smaller, have a tall facial disk, and lack dense horizontal barring on their chest and flanks.



Short-eared Owls are very happy on the ground! This species nests on the ground and is often found in habitats with very little perching opportunities.



The flight of Short-eared Owls is often described as moth-like, with very buoyant wing beats. This style of flight allows the owl to use its ears to hunt, just like most owl species. During the breeding season, Short-eared Owls do not call to attract a mate, but instead do elaborate courtship flights over potential nesting areas to attract females!