

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*



Folk Name: Marsh Owl

Status: Winter Visitor

Abundance: Very Rare

Habitat: Weedy fields, marshes

Unexpectedly flushing a Short-eared Owl from an icy field of broomsedge in the middle of winter is an utterly thrilling experience. These 15-inch buff-colored birds blend in so well that they remain entirely hidden until they are almost stepped upon. Then, at the last second, they gently and silently lift off the ground and fly slowly away with their piercing yellow-eyes fixed upon you as they go. Once safely away, they will unexpectedly drop into another part of the field, immediately disappearing out of sight. Unfortunately, Short-eared Owls are a rare find these days anywhere in the Carolina Piedmont. They are a declining species, and their preferred habitat of wide-open fields is being lost to development at an increasing pace.

Unlike other owls, Short-eared Owls are open country birds that can be seen foraging over fields at dawn or dusk.

“The short-eared owl contradicts about every popular concept of owl traits and habits. It frequently hunts its prey in broad day light, almost never perches in a tree, and prefers open fields and marshlands to the woods.”

—*Statesville Record and Landmark*, June 13, 1949

They are small mammal specialists, and they hunt when these mammals are most active. In June 1914, *The Charlotte Observer* shared this piece in an attempt to convince farmers of their value and to help reduce the incidence of their killing:

The short-eared owl is a real friend of the farmer. Of his food, 95 percent is made up of our four-legged pests and insect foes of the farms. His noiseless wings make him a most effective hunter and he always hunts near home. A Farm and Fireside contributor appraises a good healthy short-ear at about \$30, as regards his worth to the man whose crops he helps to guard.

In the late 1800s, Leverett Loomis stated this owl was “rather common” in the region in old broomsedge fields during the late fall and winter.

In the twentieth century, most of the reports of Short-eared Owls found in the Central Carolinas were of injured birds. Charles Plexico collected a specimen of a Short-eared Owl in Matthews, NC, in November 1951. Roger McPherson reported finding one in Lincoln County on



October 24, 1977. An injured bird was found in Stanly County near Badin on November 27, 1986, and was taken to the Carolina Raptor Center. An emaciated Short-eared Owl was discovered in Matthews on November 7, 1988. This bird was taken to the Carolina Raptor Center for treatment, but it later died. The specimen was later delivered to the North Carolina State Museum in Raleigh. The author and Faye Metzl flushed a Short-eared Owl at Creech’s Pond in York County on December 31, 1988. This bird flew into Mecklenburg County and was later relocated by a group of excited birders. Another injured Short-eared Owl was found within the Concord City limits in Cabarrus County on October 24, 1999, and was turned over to the Raptor Center.

There have been a handful of records in the region since the turn of the twenty-first century.

Note: The Carolina Raptor Center turned over a dead Short-eared Owl to the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences with a date of July 23, 2005, and the location as Mecklenburg County. However, it appears this particular bird was brought into the center at a different time from an unknown location and was kept for an unknown length of time before it died.

Harriett Whitsett reported one in the fields near Medlock’s pond at the prairie restoration site at McDowell Nature Preserve in southwestern Mecklenburg County on January 10, 2006.

On December 12, 2010, Kim Garrett found a Short-eared Owl in a field in a partially developed subdivision in Union County, not far from Monroe. This bird remained there until at least February 17, 2011, and it was very cooperative. Many birders were able to view it and add it to their life list, and many photographers were able to get great shots of it. This owl emerged regularly each afternoon and patrolled the field with its characteristic “bouncy” or

“floppy” flight. Jeff Lemons reported: “WOW. Once again it appeared at precisely 4:50 pm and for the next half hour we got excellent views of it working the weedy field. Many times it flew directly towards us, giving us great views of the beautiful facial disks and round little head. Once it flew straight towards us, only about 20–25 feet [in front of] us before veering off to circle the field again.”

Kevin Metcalf saw a Short-eared Owl pop up on the edge of the tarmac at the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport on December 29, 2010. Metcalf was there watching a visiting Rough-legged Hawk. This owl stayed for several weeks, and though it was not easy to find, the bird was later relocated by many other observers and was counted on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count.

Our most recent report came from Ron Clark who

was asked by the Carolina Raptor Center to respond to a report of an owl seen standing on the edge of highway US-74 in Cleveland County, a few miles outside of Shelby, on October 5, 2011. When Clark arrived he was surprised to find the bird was a Short-eared Owl. Unfortunately, another person was there, and the man repeatedly interfered with his attempts to capture the injured bird. Clark called 911, but by the time the police arrived, the bird had just enough strength and mobility that it either ran or flew away. Clark remarked that despite his 20 year history of successful bird rescues: “I’ve never had this happen.”

In *The State of the Birds 2014 Report*, scientists warn that the continental population of the Short-eared Owl is in steep decline.