

# Short-eared Owl (SEOW)

*Asio flammeus*

## Description

Short-eared Owls are one of the few owls active during both day and night, though they are often seen at dawn and dusk. They are medium-sized (~34–42 cm long) with a blend of mottled dark and light brown on their back, which provides good camouflage in dried grasses. They have bright yellow eyes, dark eye patches, and a pale gray facial disk. Despite their name, the short ear tufts are rarely visible so are not often used for identification. Short-eared Owls have white/rusty undersides, with bold brown vertical streaks on their breast and finer streaks on their belly and flanks. They have long, rounded wings and a short tail, and fly with deep wingbeats. Their underwings are white with distinct black markings on the wrist and wingtips, and have 5-6 horizontal bars on their tail. Females have slightly darker backs and heavier streaking than males. Similarly, juveniles are very similar to adults, with an overall more buff-coloured plumage. Chicks are covered in light brown down on their back and whiter down on their underparts. Northern Harriers use the same habitat and can look very similar, but have a distinct white rump above a long tail, which Short-eared Owls lack.

## Known and potential breeding habitat

Short-eared Owls are an open habitat species, inhabiting large open areas with abundant small mammalian prey. In Newfoundland, breeding evidence is typically seen between 15 Feb and 27 July. Breeding habitat is found throughout Newfoundland, including on the Northern Peninsula and in central Newfoundland (between Musgrave Harbour and Deadman's Cove).

## Detection Tips

### Habitat

Short-eared Owls almost always breed in open habitats, including tundra, coastal barrens, sand dunes, grasslands, and wetlands. They are ground nesters, requiring dry substrate for nests, and vegetation to provide protection for nesting females.

### Vocalization

Short-eared Owls are not particularly vocal. Males may make a courtship song consisting of a dozen or more "hoots" in quick succession during his courtship flight. However, the most frequently heard call is a bark-like call directed at territorial intruders, including humans. Both males and



Photo By: Scott Leslie



Open/Meadow



COSEWIC Ranking:  
Threatened



NL Designation:  
Vulnerable



Owls



Photo By: Scott Leslie



Photo By: Vernon Buckle

females may also scream or whine while defending the nest.

### *Behaviour*

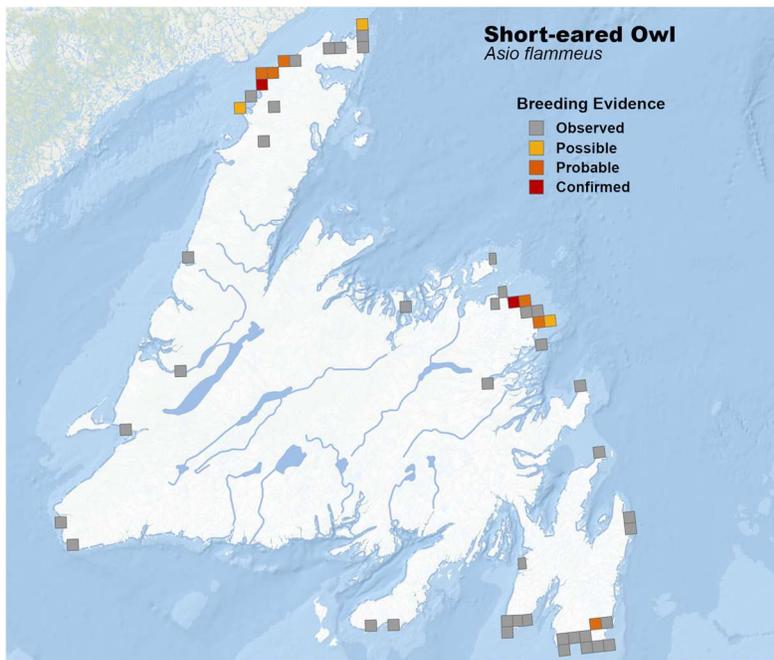
While foraging, Short-eared Owls fly low over open habitats, making buoyant, slow, deliberate wing beats while listening for prey; they often hover shortly before diving straight down to the ground (stooping) to capture prey. They forage primarily at dusk and dawn, though they can be observed during the day. When defending nests or young from intruders, both males and females will vocalize, clap their wings, snap their bills, and give broken wing distraction displays. During the breeding season, males court females by performing sky dances where they ascend in small circles, hang in the air, and stoop while wing-clapping.

### *Nesting*

Short-eared Owls nest on the ground on dry sites with short vegetation (< 0.5 m). Females construct the nest by scraping a bowl into the ground and lining it with grasses and downy feathers. They lay 4–7 smooth, white eggs and do all the incubating and brooding; meanwhile, males provide food to females and young. Females are rarely scared off the nest, and males may become aggressive near the nest.

### *Breeding Evidence*

In Newfoundland, Short-eared Owl breeding evidence detected to date includes: individuals (H) or pairs (P) in suitable nesting habitat, and courtship displays (D). Other breeding evidence possible for Short-eared Owls are singing males (S) in suitable nesting habitat, agitated behaviour (A), injury feigning (DD), fledged young (FY), nest containing eggs (NE) or nest with young (NY). Only use adults carrying food (CF) when you know they are bringing it straight to a nest, as adults will carry food long distances to consume on their own, not necessarily indicating breeding.



Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus*) were detected in 51 squares in Newfoundland during the past ten years (2011–2021). Breeding was confirmed in 2 of these squares.