

Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey



National Conservation Area

Long-eared Owl

(*Asio otus*)

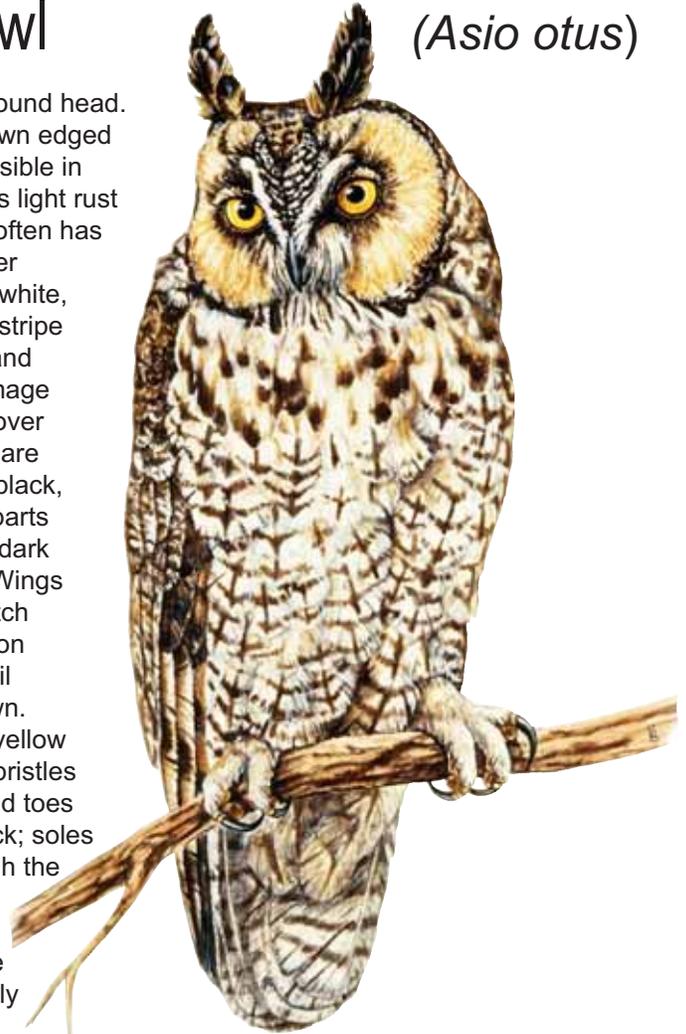
Description/Size

Wing span: 36-42 inches

Length: 13-16 inches

Weight: 8-15 ounces

Medium sized owl with large round head. Long ear tufts mostly dark brown edged with light rust and white; not visible in flight. Large round facial disk is light rust to buff, circled with black that often has distinctive white inner and outer borders. Forehead speckled white, brown, and rust. Dark vertical stripe through eye. White eyebrows and lores; white chin patch. Plumage is heavily mottled and barred over most of the body. Upper parts are dark brown mixed with white, black, orange, buff and gray. Under parts are whitish-gray and buff with dark brown streaking and barring. Wings are long and rounded; buff patch on upperwing and dark patch on underwing; both near wrist. Tail feathers barred with dark brown. Bill and cere black. Iris bright yellow to golden yellow; eyelids and bristles around the eye black. Legs and toes densely feathered. Talons black; soles grayish. Sexes are alike though the male tends to be paler, especially facial disk, legs, and underwings. Juveniles are similar to adults but less heavily marked. Ear tufts are shorter and less defined and facial disk darker.



Body feathers are tipped with grayish white. Six subspecies recognized; two in North America: *A. o. wilsonianus* (e. North America); and *A. o. tuftsi* (w. North America).

Similar Species

Short-eared owl - paler, with streaking on under parts concentrated on upper breast and no barring ventrally; ear tufts much less prominent.

Great horned owl - similarly marked but much larger; ear tufts widely spaced and pointed outward.

Habitat/Range



Inhabits open and sparsely forested habitats across North America, Eurasia and extreme northern Africa from sea level to 9000 feet elevation. Although it prefers to nest and roost in dense vegetation, it hunts almost exclusively in open habitats. Therefore it inhabits wooded or dense bushy areas that are adjacent or within open grasslands, shrub lands, marshes, riparian areas, farmlands, or shrub-steppe deserts.

Food/Diet

Diet consists of small mammals and some birds. Mice and voles are the most common prey items. Other mammal prey includes kangaroo rats, squirrels, bats, chipmunks, gophers, shrews, moles, and cottontail rabbits. Bird prey are the smaller species that occur on or near the ground: meadowlarks, blackbirds, juncos, bluebirds, and doves. Larger birds such as grouse and screech owls are occasionally taken. Sometimes takes insects, frogs and snakes. Food-caching away from nest not reported but may occur. Prey captured by male often stockpiled at nest during incubation and early brood-rearing.

Voice

Complex vocal repertoire in breeding season, but mostly silent at other times of year. Calls normally begin shortly after sunset. Male gives a series of low soft *wooop* hoots evenly spaced about every 3 seconds. Female call is a higher and softer *sheoof* repeated every 2-8 seconds. Mates often "duet". Alarm calls variable and given by both sexes. Most common is barking *ooack ooack ooack*. Adults also give drawn-out, squealing *yaow* and gruff, catlike *wawo*. Nestling calls include short, soft *szi* and louder, high-pitched *pzeei*. When food-begging gives a high squeaky *wee-ee* like a rusty hinge. Non vocal sounds include wing claps (see reproduction) and bill snaps.

Behavior

Buoyant fliers which glide noiselessly even when wings flapping. Extremely agile, using quick twists and turns when flying through dense vegetation. Hunting flight consists of long glides on level wings interrupted by deep wingbeats. Often pulls up and hovers while looking for prey. Activity normally begins at dusk and ends just before dawn. May begin hunting before sunset, especially during brood-rearing. It is an active search hunter, coursing back and forth over the ground in forest openings and along forest edges in search of prey. Has exceptional hearing and can locate prey audibly in complete darkness. Prey is caught on the ground or from bushy vegetation. Kills small mammals by biting back of skull. Roosts in dense foliage near tree trunks in the daylight hours. Stretches body to make itself appear like a tree branch. During non-breeding season roosts communally in groups of 2 to 20 birds, but up to 100 have been reported. Very territorial during breeding season. Threat displays include crouching on perch with head lowered, wings drooped, and feathers ruffled; accompanied by various alarm calls. Sometimes sways from side to side and commonly spreads wings over back. Will occasionally attack viciously, aiming for face and throat with their talons.

Nest defense display: female spreads her wings out widely facing the intruder, flares her flight feathers and lowers her head. This display makes her appear 2-3 times larger. Also perform a distraction display near nests: owl pretends to capture prey or feign injury and flop away from nest on ground making various noises. Migration in this species is poorly understood. Movement in response to fluctuating prey numbers well documented in Europe but not in North America. Spring and fall movements in appropriate directions in various U.S. locations suggest regular migration.

Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 5-7 eggs
Eggs: elliptical, 1.6 x 1.3 inches, white
Incubation: 26-28 days
Fledge: 35 days
Disperse: 70-80 days

Timing of pair formation unknown. Presumably begins during winter before communal roosts disband. In some cases males occupy breeding sites before females arrive. Male performs courtship flights over suitable



nesting habitat, but female probably selects nest site. Male courtship display involves erratic gliding and flapping through the trees with occasional single wing claps. Wing claps are produced by slapping the wings together below the body, making a sound like cracking whip given singly at irregular intervals. Can be heard for more than 330 feet. Monogamy is the rule, but polygyny reported twice in Europe. Little is known about the duration of the pair bond. A study in Montana has found no evidence that pairs re-mate in subsequent years. Doesn't build its own nest. Uses abandoned stick nests of other birds. Less often it nests in a natural cavity in a tree or cliff, or on the ground. Nests are almost always located in wooded sites screened by vegetation. May lay second clutch if first lost during incubation. Young "branch out" at about 21 days to branches within 300 feet of the nest. Begin adult-style hunting forays at 8–9 weeks, when flight feathers fully grown. They are fed by male parent until 10–11 weeks old. Breed at 1 year of age.

Life Span

Longest recorded – 12 years 1 month.

Conservation Status

Not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the long-eared owl as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. Several states list this species as endangered, threatened, or a Species of Special Concern. No estimate of numbers in North America. Relatively common in western U.S., but numbers fluctuate from year to year. Little is know about long-term trends. Long-eared owl populations appear to be stable in most of North America, but in some places this species has declined because of loss of riparian woodlands and open habitats to development, conversion of hunting areas to agricultural fields, and reforestation of open areas. Loss of riparian woodlands would be especially damaging in the arid West, where much of the nesting habitat occurs in narrow bands along watercourses. Loss of isolated tree groves would also be highly detrimental. Human caused mortality comes primarily from illegal shooting, and collisions with vehicles. Little information is available on the effects of pesticides and other contaminants on this species. Natural enemies include the great horned and barred owls, and golden eagles. Raccoons are major predators on eggs and nestlings.

Viewing in the NCA

The long-eared owl is seen in the NCA from November through June.

Interesting Facts

Spanish name:
Buho chico

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *asio*, meaning a "horned" owl, and *otus* meaning a kind of owl with long "ear" feathers.
- Common name refers to the long feather tufts on its head.
- Other names: cat owl, lesser horned owl, Wilson's owl, brush owl.
- Vision in low light apparently as good as or better than that of other North American owls.

Sources

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The Owl Pages – www.owlpages.com/owls.php?genus=Asio&species=otus
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Illustration: courtesy Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Map: The Peregrine Fund
Photography: Jeffery S. Marks

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Adult



Immature



Photos: Know Your Owls, Axia CD ROM