

Short-eared owl

Short-eared owls (*Asio flammeus*) nest on the ground and are active during daylight hours



Our most diurnal owl, it is often seen sitting on a post or quartering open country. In flight it is paler, more stocky and longer-winged than the long-eared owl, and the tail and wings are more boldly barred. Its body plumage is brown, spotted and streaked with buff, yellow and white. It is pale beneath with a boldly streaked chest. The yellowish facial disc with bright yellow eyes set in black patches gives this owl a cross expression.

Length: 37-39cm; wingspan: 95-110cm

Status in UK

1,000-3,000 pairs, probably declining; AMBER listed; resident and winter visitor, sometimes in large numbers

Population trends

In the 19th century the main population was in the uplands of Scotland and the north of England with a second area in the fens and marshes of the east coast of England. The short-eared owl has always been a scarce, localised bird in most of these areas, except in the Outer Hebrides and Orkney.

During the first half of the 20th century reduced grazing and the spread of plantations in the uplands favoured this species and allowed it to increase. It particularly liked these areas when the trees had just been planted but as they grew up the forest became unsuitable and numbers declined again.

This owl is very dependent on short-tailed voles, and so numbers increase significantly when its prey populations are high. There are also large influxes of wintering birds from Scandinavia after populations of small mammals peak there.

Habitat and distribution

The short-eared owl is found on heaths, grass moors, marshes and sand dunes; in winter it is particularly found on coastal marshes and adjoining farmland.

This species is resident in the north and east of England, north and west Wales and the south and east of Scotland. Summer visitors breed in the Highlands and west coast of Scotland. Scottish birds and those from Scandinavia winter in southern England and Northern Ireland.

Breeding

The nest is on the ground hidden among grass, heather or reeds. They are one of the few owls to make a nest. The female makes a scrape which she lines with whatever vegetation is available close by. One brood is usual, but when voles are plentiful, short-eared owls may have two broods or increase the number of eggs in the clutch.

Feeding

Field voles are this owls' most important prey, but other small mammals such as wood mouse and shrews may be taken. They will also catch rats, especially in Ireland where voles are lacking. Birds, usually between the size of finches and thrushes particularly young ones, are also caught.