

OWLS IN ALBERTA



Snowy Owl
Nyctea scandiaca

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The snowy owl is easily identified by its white plumage, round earless head and broad white wings. It is about 60 cm (24 in.) long. Color ranges from pure white to white barred with varying amounts of brown to black. Juveniles and females are usually more heavily barred than adult males. Snowy owls migrate from the Arctic to Alberta and the other provinces in winter and return to the Arctic in summer. On their migration south they can often be found perched on fence posts, haystacks and buildings overlooking marshes and open farmland. During the winters, snowy owls are distributed throughout Alberta east of the Rockies.

Five to 8 eggs are laid in thinly lined depressions on the ground, preferably on the higher areas of the tundra.

The snowy owl is active during the day. In the southern regions of its range, rabbits, hares and small rodents form the majority of its diet.

Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa*

The long loose plumage of the great grey owl makes it the largest of all the owls in Alberta (75 cm, 29 in. long). The body is dark grey streaked throughout with lighter grey. The large



rounded head lacks ear tufts.

The facial disk is large and well defined. Darker grey concentric circles surround the eyes.

Great grey owls are seldom found away from dense timber. In Alberta, they inhabit forests of the mixedwood and foothill zones in the northern half of the province.

Nesting occurs in trees, usually in an old, bulky nest built by other birds. Two to 5 eggs are laid.

The great grey owl is most active during the early mornings and late evenings. From a perch in a tree it swoops down upon its prey — usually small mammals and birds.



Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus*

Our largest eared owl (55 cm, 22 in. long), the great horned owl is common throughout Alberta, and is the Provincial Bird. It is readily identified by its large size and prominent "horns" pointed toward the sides of the head. In flight, the ear tufts are held flat against the head. The neck and back are light brown speckled, streaked and barred with black and white. The undersides are light in color and heavily barred, accentuating the white throat.

The great horned owl resides all year in forests, open woods and river valleys of all but the alpine zone. The total range includes North and South America with breeding occurring north to tree line.

During the breeding season, pairs confine themselves to wooded areas. The great horned owl nests earlier than all other birds

in Alberta (with the possible exception of the grey jay). Two to three eggs are laid in later February and early March in old nests built by hawks or crows.

Prey includes large insects, mice, rabbits, domestic and game birds. Hunting begins at dusk, but on dark days the owl may hunt in the afternoon.



Hawk Owl *Surnia uvula*

Although a true owl, this bird closely resembles a hawk because of its short, relatively pointed wings, long wedge-shaped tail, and its hawk-like flight and perching posture. A medium-sized owl (35 cm, 14 in. long), the hawk owl is distinguished by a lack of ear tufts, dark brown upper parts with white spotted wings and a speckled and streaked crown and hindneck. The white underside is finely barred with black, and two darker patches are located on either side of the breast.

The hawk owl frequents brushy openings and muskgs of all but the alpine and prairie zones. Fully active during the day, it hunts very much like a hawk. Perching on dead trees and skimming low and rapidly over the ground, it swoops down on mice and voles, its predominant prey species.



Saw-Whet Owl *Aegolius acadicus*

The saw-whet owl is a small owl that can be confused with the boreal owl. It is distinguished by

its smaller size (20 cm, 8 in. long), darker plumage and streaked forehead. The reddish brown plumage on the upper parts is streaked with white around the face, and is splotched with white on the neck. The tail is banded with three bars. The breast and abdomen are white with heavy brown streaks. The saw-whet inhabits woods of the parkland, foothill and montane zones.

Because this owl is completely nocturnal and hunts and roosts close to the ground, it is very seldom seen. It preys upon small rodents found on the forest floor.



Barred Owl *Strix varia*

This big, grey-brown owl has the appearance of wearing a large collar formed by the barring of the head, neck and breast feathers. It is about 52cm (20 in.) long.

The tail, back, wings and head are dark greyish brown, barred heavily with white. The undersides are white with dark spots on the neck, bars on the breast and broad vertical streaks on the abdomen. The facial disk is grey with concentric circles around the eyes. Unlike all the other owls, the barred owl has dark brown irises instead of yellow. It inhabits swamps and dense forest of the mixedwood, foothill and montane zones, but hunts in neighboring open country.

A nocturnal hunter, the barred owl preys mainly on mice, but also utilizes insects, frogs, fish and

small birds.



Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia*

A bird of the open country, the burrowing owl is almost always found on or close to the ground. It is easily identified by its long legs and short, barred tail. It is about 24 cm (9 in.) long. The head, neck and wings are light brown with white streaks on the crown and larger spots on the back and wings. A light line extends from under the throat down the middle of the breast and abdomen, and the plumage on either side is speckled and barred with brown.

During the early evenings and mornings, the burrowing owl sets forth in search of insects and small mammals.



Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium gnoma*

The pygmy owl can be distinguished by its small size (16 cm, 6 in. long), earless head, dark brown plumage, heavily streaked undersides and a long, barred tail. It is smaller and darker in color than the saw-whet owl. The upper parts are dark grey-brown speckled with white. Two black "eye-spots" are located on the back of the head. The underparts are predominantly white with large grey-brown patches on the sides of the breast and dark streaks throughout. This owl prefers open coniferous and mixedwood forests of the foothill and montane zones.

Resident throughout the year west of the Rocky Mountains.

A daylight hunter, it swoops from perch to

perch and onto mice and other small mammals that make up its diet.



Short-Eared Owl
Asio flammeus

This is a light colored owl with small ear tufts that are seldom visible. It is about 36 cm (14 in.) long. In flight, the large, round, seemingly neckless head and dark patches on the underside of the wings are easily seen. The upper parts of the body are a yellowish to buff color with brown streaking on the crown, neck and back, and barring on the wings. The pale underparts are heavily streaked with brown on the breast. It is found throughout the province, except in the alpine and montane zones of the Rocky Mountains.

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