



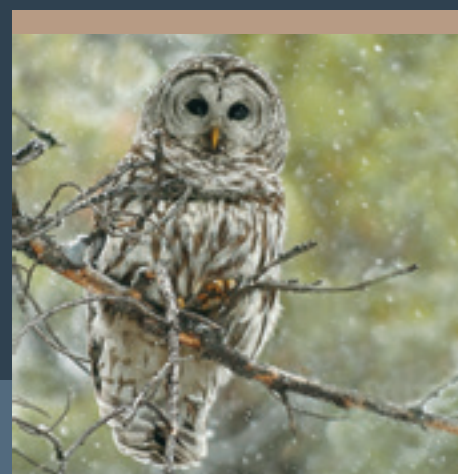
PHANTOM OF THE BOREAL FOREST » GREAT GRAY OWL

Alberta Government

O W L S O F A L B E R T A

PHOTOS BY GORDON COURT©

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Barred Owl

52 CM (20 IN.) LONG

appearance

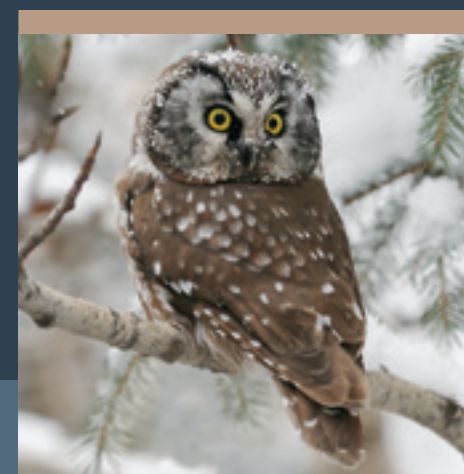
This owl has the appearance of wearing a large collar formed by the barring of the head, neck and breast feathers. The tail, back, wings and head are dark greyish-brown, barred heavily with white. Unlike most other Alberta owls, the eye of the barred owl has a dark brown iris instead of yellow.

habitat

Inhabiting the boreal mixed-wood, foothill and montane zones, barred owls are an interior forest species, requiring larger blocks of mature dense woodland. They nest in cavities of large dead trees, usually the balsam poplar.

feeding habits

Their prey mainly consists of mice, voles and squirrels, but they will also eat amphibians and smaller birds. Even though they are mainly nocturnal, they will sometimes hunt before dark.



Boreal Owl

25 CM (10 IN.) LONG

appearance

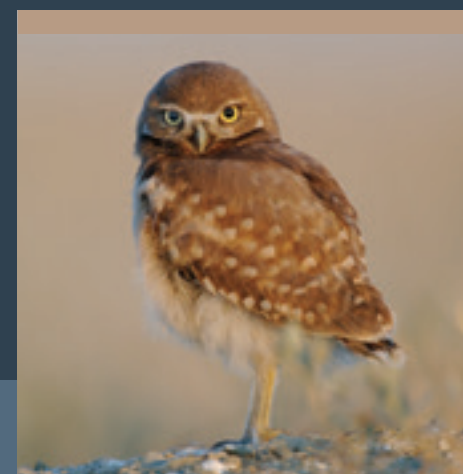
The upper parts of grey-brown with white spots on the forehead, crown and the area around the facial disk. The head often appears quite square. A distinctive brown bar separates the head from the breast, which is white with streaks and blotches of brown.

habitat

Taking up residence in mixed-wood and pure coniferous forests, they are dependent on older trees and primary cavity excavators like woodpeckers for nesting.

feeding habits

A nocturnal hunter, their main diet consists of rodents, small birds, and occasionally even bats.



Burrowing Owl

24 CM (9 IN.) LONG

appearance

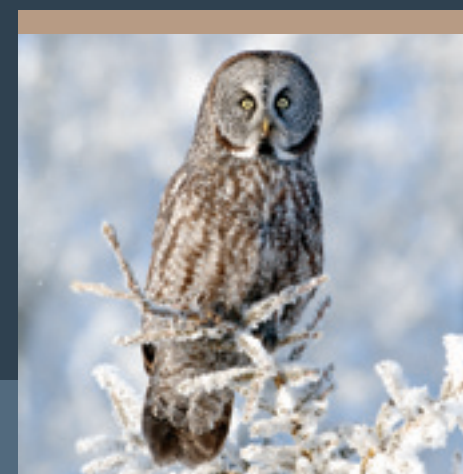
Easily identified by its long legs and short barred tail. The head, neck and wings are light brown with white streaks on the crown and larger spots on the back and wings. A light line extends from under the throat down to the middle of the breast and abdomen and the plumage on either side is speckled and barred with brown.

habitat

Found in the short grass plains of the prairie, they require open areas with low ground cover, burrows for nesting, and abundant food. Sharp population declines have occurred across the range for this bird; it is considered Endangered under the provincial Wildlife Act in Alberta.

feeding habits

Eating a variety of foods, including insects, rodents, reptiles, and amphibians and small birds, they hunt day and night.



Great Gray Owl

75 CM (29 IN.) LONG

appearance

The largest of all the owls in Alberta, the body is dark grey streaked throughout with lighter grey. The large rounded head lacks ear tufts and the facial disk is large and well-defined with darker grey concentric circles surrounding the eyes.

habitat

Seldom found away from dense timber. In Alberta they inhabit forests of the boreal mixed-wood and foothill zones of the province. Requiring mature forest for nesting, they will use the tops of broken snags (dead trees) or old stick nests made by hawks, ravens or crows.

feeding habits

A large but lightly built owl, the primary prey of the great gray owl consists of small rodents, most notably the meadow vole. They are most active in early mornings and late evenings.



Great Horned Owl

55 CM (22 IN.) LONG

appearance

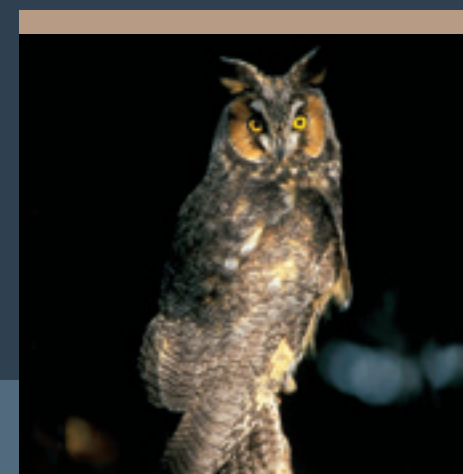
The neck and back are light brown speckled, streaked and barred with black and white. The undersides are light in colour and heavily barred, accentuating the white throat. Readily identified by its large size and prominent “horns” on the top of the head.

habitat

Resides all year in dense continuous forests, open woods and river valleys in the alpine zones of Alberta. The total range includes North and South America with breeding occurring as far north as the tree line.

feeding habits

Prey ranges from large insects, rodents, rabbits, upland game birds to even waterfowl. Hunting begins at dusk, but on heavily overcast days the owl may hunt in the afternoon.



Long-eared Owl

35 CM (14 IN.) LONG

appearance

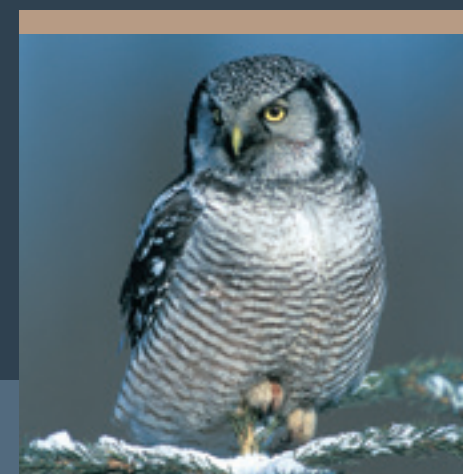
Aptly named, this is a very slender, medium-sized bird with long ear tufts set close to the middle of the head. The upper portion of the body is dark brown with speckles of white on the back of the head and barred elsewhere with white. The underside is white with dark streaks on the breast and barring on the abdomen.

habitat

As they are dependent on trees for both roosting and nesting, they are seen in woodlands, forest edges, and patches of trees where dense cover for nesting exists with open areas for hunting nearby. They nest in abandoned crow, magpie, and hawk nests.

feeding habits

A nocturnal hunter, they rarely hunt in wooded areas, instead range over open rangeland. Their main prey consists of small rodents, however, they will eat other mammals and even some birds.



Northern Hawk Owl

35 CM (14 IN.) LONG

appearance

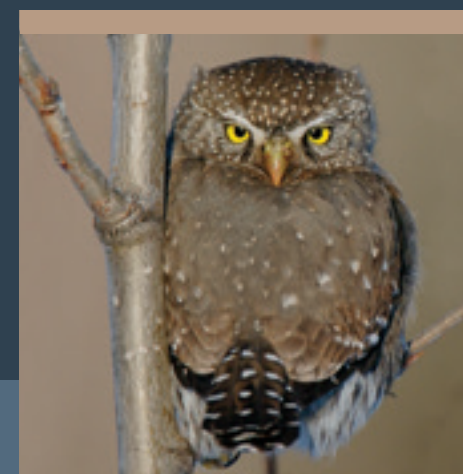
Distinguished by a lack of ear tufts, dark brown upper parts with white spotted wings and a speckled and streaked crown and hindneck. Although a true owl, this bird closely resembles a hawk because of its short, relatively pointed wings, long wedge-shaped tail, and its hawk-like flight and perching posture.

habitat

A bird of the northern coniferous forests, they frequent brushy openings and muskegs. It usually nests in tree cavities, often taking over abandoned pileated woodpecker holes.

feeding habits

The main prey consists of small mammals, especially mice and voles. It will hunt both in bright sunlight and at night, as they spend most of their time at northern latitudes with continuous sunlight.



Northern Pygmy Owl

16 CM (6 IN.) LONG

appearance

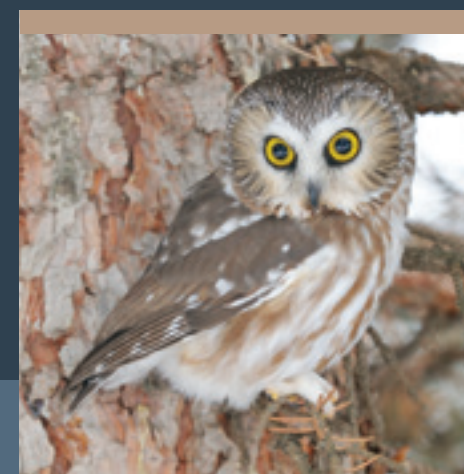
Distinguished by its small size, earless head, dark brown plumage, heavily streaked undersides and a long, barred tail. The upper parts are dark grey-brown speckled with white and they have two distinctive, vertical black patches on the nape resembling an extra pair of eyes.

habitat

Their preferred habitat consists of heavy stands of coniferous forest or mixed-wood with a good percentage of spruce, pine or fir that have meadows or other openings, often near riparian areas. They often nest in the abandoned holes of primary cavity excavators like the hairy woodpecker and northern flicker.

feeding habits

This owl usually hunts during the day, and their main prey includes small rodents, large insects, small birds and amphibians.



Northern Saw-whet Owl

20 CM (8 IN.) LONG

appearance

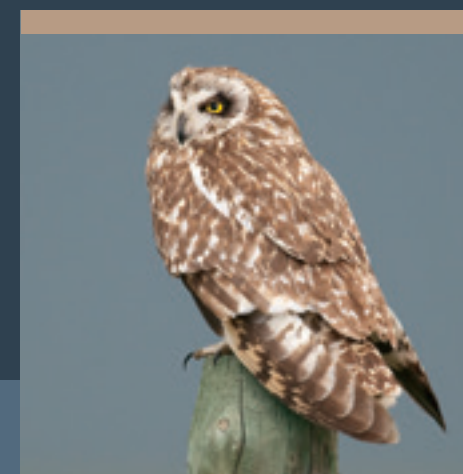
The reddish-brown plumage on the upper parts is streaked with white around the face, and is splotched with white on the neck. The tail is banded with three bars, and the breast and abdomen are white with heavy brown streaks.

habitat

Inhabits the parkland, foothill, montane and southern boreal mixed-wood. Prefers moist areas, alder thickets and tamarack bogs to drier deciduous areas.

feeding habits

Hunting mainly at dusk and dawn, their main prey is mice and voles, but are also known to eat larger insects, songbirds, shrews and occasionally amphibians.



Short-eared Owl

36 CM (14 IN.) LONG

appearance

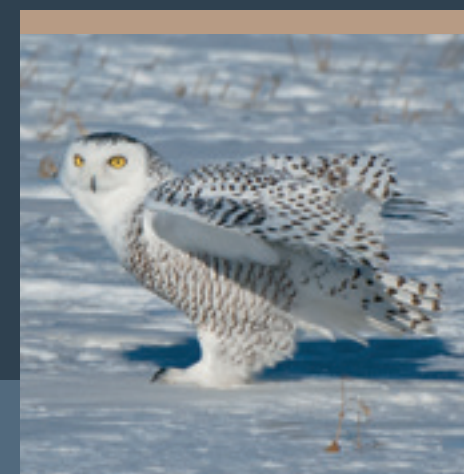
The upper parts of the body are a yellowish to buff colour with brown streaking on the crown, neck and back, and barring on the wings. The pale underparts are heavily streaked with brown on the breast. Ear tufts are short or absent entirely and a key field mark is two dark “wrist” patches on the underside of their wings, which can easily be observed in flight.

habitat

A nomadic bird of the open grassland, marshes and farmland, this owl breeds in Alberta. This owl is a ground nester, usually nesting in a lined depression on the ground.

feeding habits

Hunting during both the day and night, their primary prey is meadow voles, but they will also eat other small mammals and occasionally birds.



Snowy Owl

60 CM (24 IN.) LONG

appearance

Easily identified by its white plumage, round ear-less head and broad white wings. Colour ranges from pure white to white barred with varying amounts of brown to black. Barring is mostly observed in females and juveniles.

habitat

Migrates from the Arctic to Alberta (east of the Rockies) and the other provinces in winter and returns to the Arctic in summer. Does not breed in Alberta.

feeding habits

Prey includes hares and small rodents. Active during the day.



Barn Owl

41 CM (16 IN.) LONG

appearance

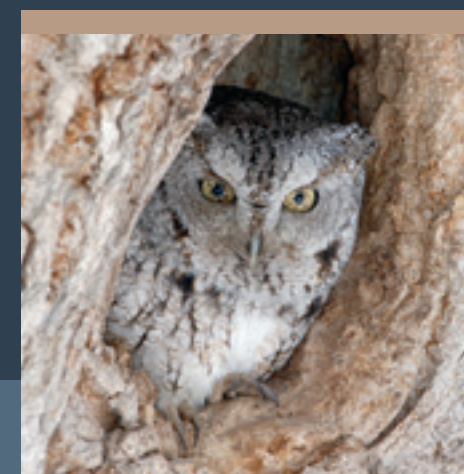
A medium-sized owl with heart-shaped facial discs, long legs, and no ear-tufts. The dark brown eyes are relatively small and often appear black, even at close quarters.

habitat

This species has never been recorded as a breeding bird in Alberta, but has been recorded inhabiting pole barns and other agricultural buildings as far north as Wetaskiwin and Bashaw. The species has a huge global distribution but is largely absent from areas of cold climate. With warmer winters, Alberta may see breeding records for this species in the near future.

feeding habits

Primarily nocturnal, this species searches suitable habitat by quartering on the wing. It tends to prefer small mammal prey, including bats on occasion. Most ground-dwelling prey are located by a well-developed sense of hearing.



Eastern Screech Owl

22 CM (8.5 IN.) LONG

appearance

Of the few birds ever photographed in Alberta, most were of the gray morph. However, brown and red morphs exist within the prime range in the eastern United States.

habitat

This species has never been recorded as a breeding bird in Alberta, but most likely breeds in the South Saskatchewan River valley. Often seen in cavities in old cottonwood trees, the species has been heard and seen in Police Point and Strathcona Island Parks within the city limits of Medicine Hat.

feeding habits

This species is a ‘sit and wait hunter’ and is strictly nocturnal. These small owls take a wide variety of small animals including rodents, small birds, and insects.