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Michigan's Endangered barking Owl

The Short-eared Owl is listed as a vulnerable species worldwide and somewhat common in North America, South America, Eurasia and many oceanic islands. However, in Michigan it is listed as an endangered species, having been observed in less than a dozen counties state-wide within the last three decades. The Short-eared Owl has been showing a steady decline in numbers for the past several years in most of its range.

The Short-eared Owl is a medium sized owl, measuring 13-17 inches in length. As the name suggests the owl displays short ear tufts but is accompanied by a heightened sense of hearing. This owl has a large head with big eyes and a wide wingspan ranging from 33-41 inches, more than 2.5 times its own body length. The coloration of streaked brown and buff helps it blend in with its surroundings and can make it difficult to identify. The scratchy barking call that the Short-eared Owl makes is its most distinctive feature and the easiest way to identify the owl.

This species of owl prefers large, open grasslands close to marshes, streams or wet meadows with a good mix of small rodents and insects on which to feed. The Short-eared Owl is unique from most owl species because it hunts both day and night and is not strictly nocturnal. According to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources it is likely that the Short-eared Owl was never overly abundant in Michigan due to the lack of large contiguous grassland habitat in our state. However, the population numbers in Michigan have been rapidly declining due to the loss of habitat to development and succession and the use of pesticides that kill off the owl's food sources.

Luckily, the owl can benefit from many of the management plans currently in use for restoring bird populations in grasslands and marshes. The best techniques to help bring back the Short-eared Owl include prescribed burning and scheduled mowing, done every few years between mid-April to mid-July.

A good place to observe the Short-eared Owl in Michigan is at the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge in Saginaw County. The refuge has teamed up with the Saginaw Valley Audubon Society (SVAS) to provide high quality habitat for the endangered owl while also providing unique opportunities to observe this rare bird. Members and volunteers from the SVAS now host auto tours of the refuge to see the bird without disturbing its habitat. In 2006, the refuge had a record 18 owls observed.

Short-eared Owls are also consistently observed on the Raco Plains in the Eastern Upper Peninsula, near Saulte Ste. Marie according to Tom Funke, Michigan Audubon Conservation Director.

Although the owl was never overly abundant in Michigan, many Short-eared Owls migrated and spent time in Michigan. Management plans in place for Pheasants will help increase population numbers of Short-eared Owls in Michigan and hopefully remove the bird from the Michigan Endangered Species list.

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