



ORI

FACT SHEET

Long-eared Owl

The Long-eared Owl may not garner the attention of its look-alike, the Great Horned Owl, but they need our help much more



Asio otis

Since 1970, Long-eared Owl populations are estimated to have declined by 91%*

Photograph by In Light

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A Long-eared Owl sighting represents the well-being of an entire ecosystem. Typically non-existent in locations where riparian areas, grasslands, shrubs, and forests are unhealthy or diminishing, Long-eared Owls use each of these habitats for crucial purposes. Riparian areas and grasslands serve as hunting grounds; forests and dense shrubbery provide nest and roost sites. Their dependence on such an array of ecosystems is linked to decreasing populations: agriculture, human development, and reforestation are negatively impacting Long-eared Owls.

Interestingly, Long-eared Owls don't actually have long ears. The tufts perched atop their heads are not ears at all; instead, they are small groups of specialized, long feathers that stand up when the owl is alarmed and in need of camouflage. By resembling sticks, these feather tufts enable them to blend into trees and dense foliage when

feeling threatened. Tiny muscles control the rise and relaxation of these tufts.

Unlike most owls, Long-eared Owls prefer to hang out with groups of friends. This is called communal roosting. Typically, communal roosts occur in the winter and contain between 2 to 20 owls. However, roosts of up to 100 birds have been reported! On occasion, Short-eared Owls have also been sighted in these communal roosts.

Female Long-eared Owls aren't easily impressed. In fact, male suitors must dance elaborately and sing beautiful songs to woo them. Males zoom through the air, clapping their wings to produce a whip-like sound, and sing complex songs to impress females. After this exhausting display, the male picks a place to roost, where he continues to flirt by swaying back and forth, gently flapping his wings.

LONG-EARED OWLS AT A GLANCE

HEIGHT

Males: 13.8 - 15.0 in
Females: 14.6 - 15.7 in

POP. ESTIMATE

50,000 worldwide*

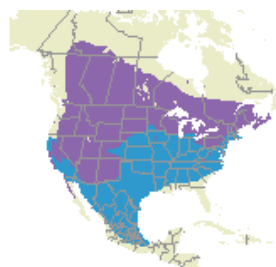
WEIGHT

Males: 7.8 - 10.8 oz
Females: 9.1 - 15.3 oz

FEEDS ON small mammals, birds, sometimes lizards, snakes and bats

WINGSPAN, BOTH

35.4 - 39.4 in



LEGEND

- Year Round
- Summer (breeding)
- Winter (non-breeding)
- Migration

Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Long-eared Owl Research

ORI's research, now in 32nd year, continually expands what we know about Long-eared Owls



The Owl Research Institute's Long-eared Owl study began in western Montana in 1987. Our initial research question was to determine if communal roosts of Long-eared Owls were comprised of family groups, other related individuals, or non-related individuals.

Long-eared Owls are one of only a few species of owls in the world that aggregate during the non-breeding season to form communal roosts. In Montana, this is usually during autumn and winter. At times, they nest near these roost sites – but do not fit the definition of colonial nesters. Our study has shown that winter communal groups of these owls rarely comprise members of the same family.

Since the study began, a host of other questions arose, as happens in most studies. These were simple research questions such as: clutch size, hatching success, fledging success, food habits, nest-site characteristics, winter roost-site characteristics, molt, migration, as well as DNA and other molecular study queries. We achieved many of our objectives and answered several original questions.

We developed a quantitative technique to discern plumage color differences between males and females. We defined long-term mating systems and determined that the owls were seasonally monogamous, but life-long polygamous. We also quantified stress hormones, which allowed us to evaluate our research impact on these owls.

Overall, however, we are most proud of our long-term data on our local populations. Sadly, our data documents a population in decline, in-line with national estimates. To date, we cannot definitively say what factors are influencing this decline but are presently trying to generate interest from other states and groups to conduct more widespread monitoring for this species.

Our Long-eared Owl study, now in its 32nd year, remains active, our sample size continually expanding. To date, we have banded over 1,900 individuals and found over 225 nests. Additionally, we have partnered with explore.org to bring live coverage of Long-eared owls nests and communal roost sites to the world.

LONG-EARED OWL FACTS

- Vulnerable to larger, more aggressive owls and hawks
- Nests vulnerable to raccoons, porcupines, snakes and other raptors
- Do not build their own nests; use stick nests previously built and abandoned by other species.
- Have feathers on toes to protect and insulate
- Species of Special Concern in California, Montana, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Missouri, & New England
- Migrate only at night
- Can catch mice in complete darkness because of asymmetrical ear openings
- Only nest once a year and lay 5-6 eggs each brood
- Swallow prey whole normally
- Branchers (young that flutter down from the nest) climb back up trees to safety by pulling themselves up trunks or bushes with their beak, wings, and talons