

North American Owls

by Alexandra Forsythe



This booklet covers the 19 northernmost owls of North America. For more information about owls, including information about the rest of the owls of North America, contact me at Indy.Bird.Luvr@gmail.com.

Barn Owl



Barn Owls have a white, rounded, heart-shaped face with dark eyes and no ear tufts. Their body is light in color with a mixture of buff and gray on the head, back and wings. Females are more reddish and spotted than males. At night, they appear to be all white.

They have short, rounded wings and short tails which give them a distinctive flight style.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
12.6-15.7"

Weight:
14.1-24.7oz

Cool Fact:

There are about 46 varieties of Barn Owl worldwide.

Where to look

Barn Owls need large areas of open land, such as farmland, grassland or marsh. For nesting and roosting, they prefer cavities in trees, barns or silos. They are commonly seen hunting along open country roads at night. You may also spot them in barns and old abandoned buildings.

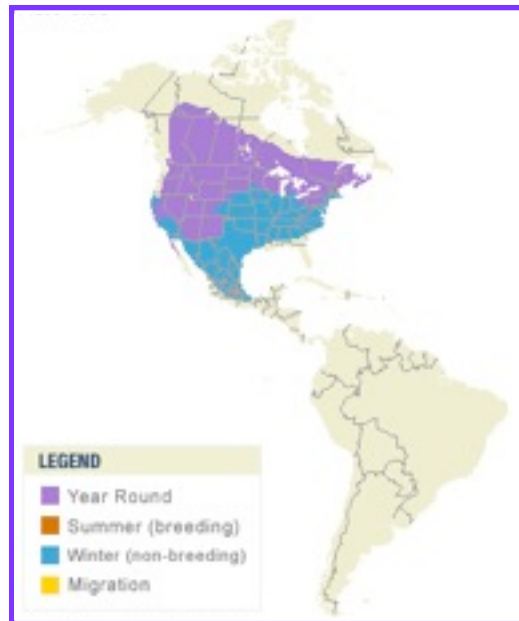
Long-eared Owl



Long-eared Owls have large ear tufts and orange cheeks. They have a white "X" between their yellow eyes, and black spots surrounding their eyes.

They are thinner than Great-Horned Owls and their ear tufts are longer.

They are mostly brown with a beautiful pattern and stripes on the chest.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
13.8-15.7"

Weight:
7.8-15.3oz

Cool Fact:

The hoot of a Long-eared Owl can be heard up to 0.7 miles away.

Where to look

Long-eared Owls live in temperate forests adjacent to open grassland or shrubland. They roost in trees by day and hunt in open areas at night. They are rarely seen and are becoming more rare. They are endangered in Illinois, threatened in Iowa and a species of concern in several states due to habitat loss.

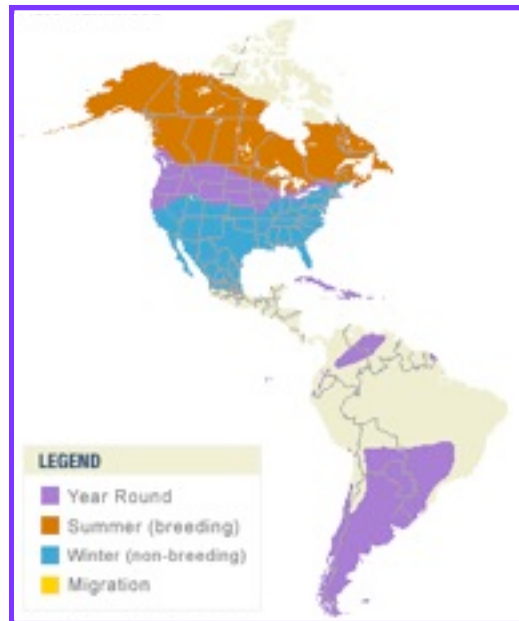
Short-eared Owl



Short-eared Owls are mostly mottled brown in color, but the chest is pale with thin streaks of brown.

There is a large buff-colored patch on each wing that you can see when the owl is in flight.

They differ from the Long-eared Owl by having smaller ear tufts (typically seen when the owl is upset), lighter color and no barring on the belly.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
13.4-16.9"

Weight:
7.3-16.8oz

Cool Fact:

This species may have benefitted from strip mining; it nests on reclaimed and replanted mines.

Where to look

Short-eared Owls prefer open country such as meadows, prairie, tundra, marshes and open woodland. This species often hunts during the day, so watch for them flying low over open ground. They nest on the ground, however, so please be careful where you walk during nesting season.

Great Horned Owl



Great Horned Owls have become the stereotype of owls; when asked to draw an owl, most people will draw a Great Horned Owl.

They are very large with long, widely spaced ear tufts. They have a white bib on their throat and yellow eyes. They can vary somewhat in color, but they are always heavily patterned on the back and barred on the belly.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
18.1-24.8"

Weight:
32.1-88.2oz

Cool Fact:

This is the only animal that regularly eats skunks.

Where to look

The Great Horned Owl is one of the most common and widespread owls in North America. It prefers open woodlands and agricultural areas, but it can be found anywhere from urban areas to boreal forests and deserts. Listen for the characteristic call: *hoo-h'HOO--hoo-hoo*

Snowy Owl



Snowy Owls are very distinctive.

They are large birds with mostly white plumage. Adult males are nearly pure white, while females have more black or brown spotting.

They have smooth, round heads and no ear tufts. They have catlike yellow eyes.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
20.5-28"

Weight:
56.4-104.1 oz

Cool Fact:
Unlike most owls, Snowy Owls are diurnal.

Where to look

Normally a resident of the arctic, Snowy Owls appear irregularly in North America in winter. You can find them on or near the ground in wide-open areas such as fields or dunes, or along the shorelines of lakes or the ocean. When they fly, they usually stay close to the ground.

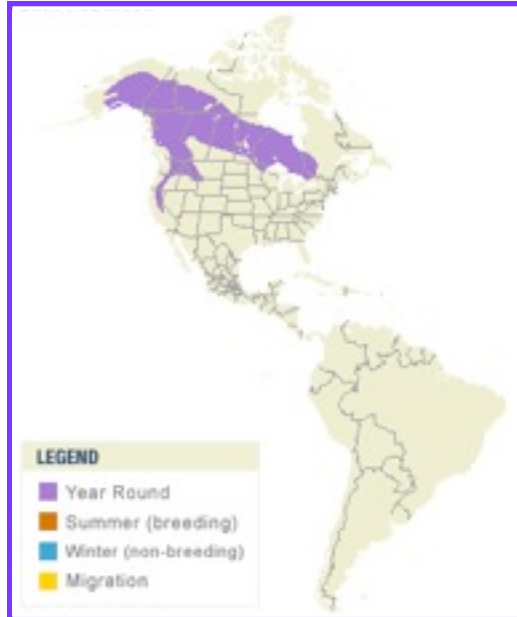
Great Gray Owl



The Great Gray is the tallest, and has the largest wingspan, of any owl in America.

It has a large round head and face. There are no ear tufts, but the Great Gray does have a white bow tie under the face. The eyes are yellow and look small in comparison to the size of the face.

The feet are relatively small.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
24-33.1"

Weight:
24.7-60oz

Cool Fact:

The Great Gray is the tallest owl in North America, but not the heaviest.

Where to look

The Great Gray Owl can be found in boreal forests and western mountains. Despite its huge size, the Great Gray's diet only consists of very small rodents. It can be seen diving through the surface of the snow to catch a mouse it located using its outstanding sense of hearing.

Spotted Owl



There are three subspecies of Spotted Owl: Northern, California and Mexican. Each has slightly different coloring and lives in a different area.

The Northern is the darkest and has the smallest white spots. The California is lighter brown and has larger spots. The Mexican is the smallest of the three subspecies. It has the lightest color, and it has the largest white spots.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
18.5-18.9"

Weight:
17.6-24.7oz

Cool Fact:

Spotted Owls may not breed every year; some do not breed for 5 to 6 years.

Where to look

Spotted Owls live in old growth forests and mature coniferous forests. The Northern can be found from northern California to British Columbia. The California can be found only in California. The Mexican can be found from Utah and Colorado to southern Mexico.

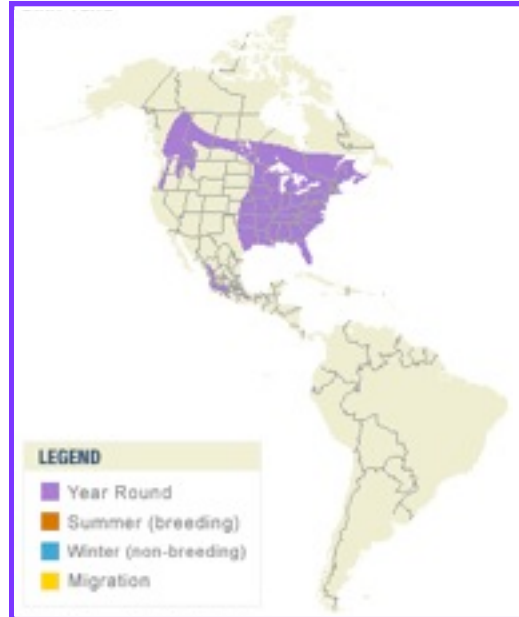
Barred Owl



Barred Owls have a rounded head with no ear tufts. They have large black eyes and a gray face.

The wings and back are brown and white mottled, and the belly is streaked.

Populations have expanded westward and may displace the endangered Spotted Owl. Hybrids of the Barred and Spotted have also been found.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
16.9-19.7"

Weight:
16.6-37oz

Cool Fact:

The belly feathers of some Barred Owls are pink.

Where to look

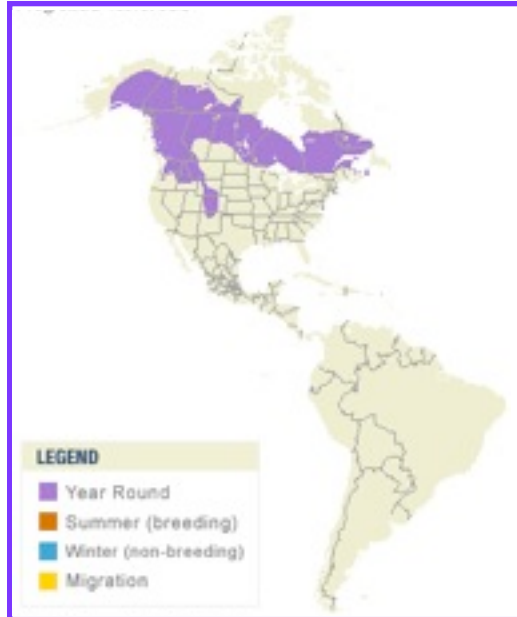
Barred Owls prefer large forested areas from lowlands to uplands. Listen for the distinctive call: "who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-all"

Boreal Owl



Boreal Owls look similar to Northern Saw-Whet Owls, but it is larger and has slightly different markings.

Boreal Owls have an angry expression due to the dark border on the face and dark line through the eye. They also have a paler bill than a Northern Saw-Whet. The Boreal has a spotted forehead, while a Northern Saw-Whet has a finely streaked forehead.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
8.3-11"

Weight:
3.3-7.6oz

Cool Fact:

The females are much larger than the males.

Where to look

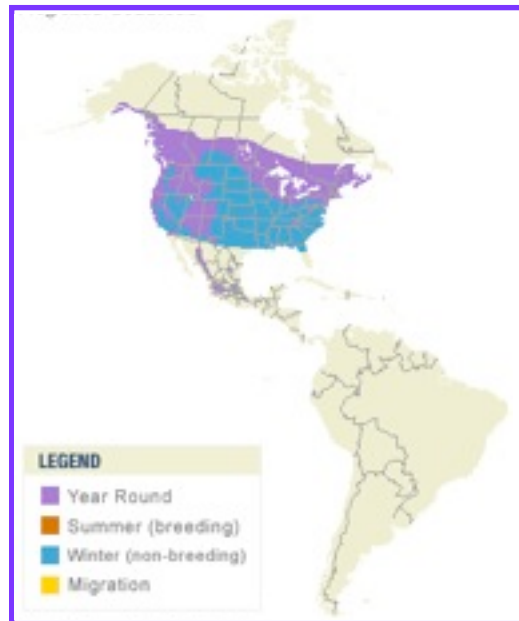
Boreal Owls are widespread and common in boreal forests with spruce, birch, poplar, aspen and balsam fir trees. It is found in the lower 48 states only in the western mountains, in extreme northern Minnesota, and occasionally in the northern states in winter.

Northern Saw-Whet



The Northern Saw-Whet Owl is small with a white face outlined in black and white. There is a white "V" between the eyes. The forehead is finely streaked.

The underparts are white streaked with brown. There are no ear tufts. The eyes are yellow and the bill is black.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
7.1-8.3"

Weight:
2.3-5.3oz

Cool Fact:

The female does all the incubating; the male brings her food.

Where to look

Northern Saw-Whet Owls can be found in all types of woodlands. They are often seen in small, dense conifer trees. When seen, they have a tendency to freeze leading people to believe they are tame.

Burrowing Owl



Since no other type of owl is commonly seen on the ground during the day, the Burrowing Owl is easy to identify as it hops along capturing insects with its feet.

It is a small owl with spots on its back and bars on the front. It has long legs, no ear tufts and a short tail.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
7.9-9.8"

Weight:
5.3oz

Cool Fact:

This owl hunts for insects during the day and small mammals at night.

Where to look

Burrowing owls live in dry, open areas with no trees and short grass. They are often found on golf courses, cemeteries, airports, pastures and prairie dog towns. If you see a prairie dog burrow with a ring of manure around it, it's probably an owl nest; they use the manure to attract insects to eat.

Flammulated Owl



The Flammulated Owl is a small owl with very short ear tufts which are often indistinct. It is gray or brownish/reddish gray. It often has rusty marks on the shoulders.

This owl has large dark eyes. In fact, this is the only small owl with dark eyes.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
5.9-6.7"

Weight:
1.6-2.2oz

Cool Fact:

This owl's diet consists primarily of nocturnal insects.

Where to look

Flammulated Owls prefer open pine forests in mountains, especially ponderosa pine forests. The unique call of this owl makes it difficult to locate. When the owl detects a person, it sings more softly so it sounds further away.

Whiskered Screech-Owl



The Whiskered Screech-Owl is virtually indistinguishable from the Western Screech-Owl.

The primary differences are the longer bristles at the base of its bill, larger white spots, and heavier streaking on the breast. Its call, a Morse code-like pattern, is also distinct from the Western Screech.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
6.5-8"

Weight:
3.5oz

Cool Fact:

This is the smallest of the North American screech owls.

Where to look

Whiskered Screech-Owls are found in pine-oak woods, oaks and sycamores. They are easiest to identify by their call. They respond to imitations and recordings, and they often come close enough to be seen with a flashlight.

Western Screech-Owl



The Western Screech-Owl is a small, mottled gray owl with ear tufts. The face is outlined in dark, especially on the lower half.

It is distinguished from the gray phase of the Eastern Screech-Owl in several ways. The Western has a darker bill and a different call.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
7.5-9.8"

Weight:
3.5-10.8oz

Cool Fact:

This owl can take prey larger than itself, including rabbits.

Where to look

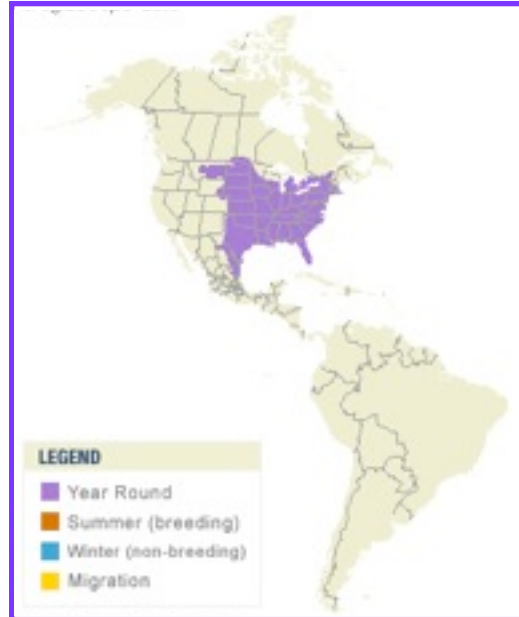
Western Screech-Owls are very adaptable and can live in a variety of habitats from urban areas to open woodlands. It is one of the west's more common owls at lower elevations. Listen for its call; it sounds like a bouncing ball.

Eastern Screech-Owl



Eastern Screech-Owls can be either mostly gray or mostly reddish brown. Their underparts are heavily barred. They are patterned such that they are perfectly camouflaged against tree bark.

The Eastern Screech has yellow eyes and pointed ear tufts. The tail is short and square, the head is large, and it has almost no neck.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
6.3-9.8"

Weight:
4.3-8.6oz

Cool Fact:

You are more likely to find the red morph in the East.

Where to look

The Eastern Screech-Owl is common in most types of woods, especially near water, from urban to rural settings. These owls are very hard to spot during the day since they blend so well with the bark of the trees, so listen for their mysterious, spooky whinny at night.

Northern Pygmy-Owl



There are three color variations of this tiny owl: grey, brown and red. They all have light bellies boldly streaked with brown.

They have relatively long, striped tails and two dark spots on the front of the neck. The eyes and bill are yellow.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
6.5-7.3"

Weight:
2.2-2.6oz

Cool Fact:

When threatened, this owl will puff up its feathers to look larger.

Where to look

Northern Pygmy-Owls prefer open forests with clearings or adjacent to open areas, and they prefer to roost in quiet, shady thickets. When hiding, it tries to look thin and closes its eyes into slits. They hunt during the day, so look for them in forest clearings and along the edges of meadows and wetlands.

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl



The Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl is tiny, with a long, barred tail. It has bold brown-streaked underparts and spotted brown upperparts.

On the back of its neck, there are two dark spots with white lines on top that resemble eyes, so it looks like this diminutive owl has eyes in the back of its head!



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
6.75"

Weight:
2.3oz

Cool Fact:

One male is reported to have called for three solid hours.

Where to look

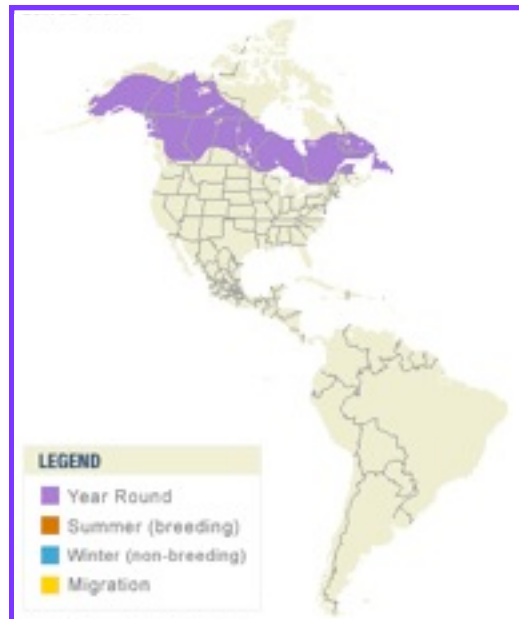
These tiny owls are often seen in a saguaro cactus, mesquite or dense streamside growth. There is a small population near Tucson, Arizona that is popular among birders. In spring, listen for the call; the male calls incessantly in spring at a rate of 90 to 150 times a minute.

Northern Hawk Owl



The Northern Hawk Owl looks like a cross between an owl and a hawk, with an unusually long, tapered tail, a hawk-shaped face, and short, pointed wings.

The face is white with a black border, and the head and forehead has numerous white spots. The underparts are white with heavy brown bars.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
14.2-17.7"

Weight:
8.5-16oz

Cool Fact:

This owl can see prey a half mile away and detect and seize prey under a foot of snow.

Where to look

Northern Hawk Owls live in coniferous or mixed forests near open areas. They hunt day or night and can be seen perching on prominent treetops. They are not as fearful of humans as many other owl species and will sometimes fly near you to investigate.

Elf Owl



This very tiny owl has a round head with no ear tufts. It is brownish-gray, but the belly is washed with white. There are cinnamon markings and white eyebrows on the face, and there are white stripes on the wings that are visible when the wings are folded.

The Elf tends to sit erect and have a knock-kneed stance.



Common in Indiana?



Yes



No

Length:
5"

Weight:
1.4oz

Cool Fact:

This is the smallest owl in North America.

Where to look

Elf Owls prefer arid deserts that are overgrown with cactus, mesquite or other woody plants. They catch their prey (typically insects) in mid-air. Watch for them hovering over insects, causing the insects to take flight where they are captured.





