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## PHOTO NOTES

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### SHORT-EARED OWL (*Asio flammeus*)

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Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* © 2011 Environment Canada - Cody Osborne

COSEWIC Status: *Special Concern 2008*

Short-eared Owl is nomadic, nesting and wintering in areas with a local abundance of *Microtus* voles and other small mammals, and generally avoids forested areas. It is a rare breeder in Saskatchewan except in low-lying grasslands in the Last Mountain Lake – Quill Lakes area.<sup>1</sup> Its irregular appearances obscure the continent-wide downward population decline as measured by Christmas Bird Counts.<sup>2</sup> The primary factor appears to be habitat loss and alternation.

Nests are hard to find, typically hidden in dense grassland, but sometimes in stubble.<sup>3</sup> The female is reluctant to flush from the grass-lined nest bowl often containing 6+ eggs (Figure 1). A nest of 7 young and 4 eggs near Greenan SK 28 May 1966 tied the North American record for largest clutch.<sup>4</sup> Egg-laying at 1-2 day intervals may begin in late April in central Saskatchewan. Incubation of about 27 days starts with the first egg resulting in asynchronous hatching (Figure 2).

Most leave the Canadian Prairies in winter. A satellite-carrying female was released at Last Mountain Lake 17 October 2007. The final signal was received 15 November near Fremont, Iowa, a distance of 1500 km (Marcel Gahbauer, Migration Research Foundation).



*Figure 1. A clutch found 29 June 2006 indicates a re-nesting attempt. All nest photos are from Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area.*

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*Figure 2. Eyes are closed in these 1-5 day old chicks found 12 June 2006.*

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*Figure 3. Buffy body feathers and dark facial masks have emerged on the larger chicks by 19 June 2006.*

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*Figure 4. The alert oldest nestling (about 12 days old) has crawled from the nest 19 June 2006. Pre-fledging dispersal at about 15 days reduces the chance that a predator will find all the young birds.*

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1. Smith AR (1996) Atlas of Saskatchewan birds. Special Publication No. 22, Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Regina.

2 COSEWIC (2008) COSEWIC assessment and update status report on the Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa.

3 Houston CS (2002) Short-eared Owl In Birds of the Saskatoon Area (A.L.

Leighton et al, eds). Special Publication No. 23, Nature Saskatchewan, Regina.

4 Houston CS (1997) Banding of Asio Owls in south-central Saskatchewan. Pp. 237-241 In Biology and conservation of owls of the Northern Hemisphere; Second international symposium, February 5-9, 1997, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada (J.R. Duncan, D.H. Johnson and T.H. Nicholls, eds.), USDA Forest Service, North-central Forest Experimental Station, St. Paul, MN. GTR-NC-190.



*Short-eared Owl*

*Pete Hardie*

*“Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language.”*

*-Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac*