

SHORT-EARED OWLS VISIT SUBURBIA IN REGINA

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My mom was startled by the significant noise in our backyard around 01:30 h on July 2, 2016. She was up reading in our family room as she usually does most nights. She was concerned that kids were on the deck, as our roofed deck is just off the kitchen and family room. She turned the backyard lights on and the noise stopped — she looked and to her relief there was no one there on the deck floor or in the backyard. However, the noise began again when the backyard lights were turned off. This went on for a few minutes.

Then, my mom thought that squirrels on the metal deck roof might be causing the racket. She went upstairs to her bedroom window that overlooks the deck roof and the backyard and she saw three birds on the deck roof. She wasn't sure what kind of birds they were until one of them showed its face. To her amazement, these birds were owls — they were causing the noisy disturbance by running back and forth on the metal roof.

Thankfully, my mom got me out of bed (thanks mom!) and showed me the birds on the deck roof. When I saw them, I realized that they were Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus*). They exactly matched the Short-eared Owl description and photo in the 'Owls of the Prairies' article in the Spring 2016 issue of Blue Jay.¹ Unfortunately the camera was downstairs and the owls would have likely gone away by the time I retrieved the camera. In a few

minutes, two of the owls moved to trees in the neighbouring yards but the third one continued to look and bark/squawk at us for more than 10 minutes from the northwest corner of the deck roof. Both the male bark/squawk calls and female 'keeyup' calls are also diagnostic for Short-eared Owls.^{2,5} We heard both types of calls. They were in and around our yard for about 45 minutes. I have never birded in my PJs or had such a good look at Short-eared Owls before. I have rarely heard Great Horned Owls hooting near our place at night. The unexpected visit of the Short-eared Owls led me to ask two questions.

Where did the owls come from? Short-eared Owls are summer residents of grasslands and haylands in Saskatchewan including outside Regina.³ Most likely they came from the open fields across the TransCanada Highway in south Regina — our house is only a few blocks from the highway. Other likely possibilities are west of Harbour Landing, the Regina Airport or Wascana Marsh. Unfortunately, the Short-eared Owl populations have declined and have been species of special concern in Canada for a number of years.⁴

Why did they come? They were likely foraging for food, specifically, mice and voles. However, they rested and played during their visit. The Short-eared Owl makes use of a wide variety of open habitats, including arctic tundra, grasslands, marshes and old pastures and specifically forages in areas with sufficient concentrations of small mammals.⁵ Low concentrations of small mammal prey near their nest may have led them into the city looking for food.



Short-eared Owl. Photo Credit: Randy McCulloch

Well-treed suburbia is not typical foraging habitat for Short-eared Owls and this type of habitat did not seem to meet their foraging needs.

1 Burrows, Kaytlyn. 2016. Owls of the Prairies. *Blue Jay* 74(1): 24

2 Duncan, James R. 2013. *The Complete Book of North American Owls*. Thunder Bay Press, San Diego, CA.

3 Smith, Alan R. 1996. *Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds*. Nature Saskatchewan, Regina SK.

4 Dickson, Ross. 2012. Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*). Photo note. *Blue Jay* 70(1): 58-61

5 Wiggins, D.A., D.W. Holt and S.M. Leasure. 2006. Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*), *The Birds of North America Online* (A. Poole, Ed.). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY. Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/062> 