



A long-eared owl at rest.

Unmasking a mysterious fall visitor to Wyoming

By Catherine Symchych

Fall is upon us, and the changing weather brings with it a suite of new birds to the Rocky Mountain region.

The **Swainson's hawks** that nested near us and hunted small rodents have headed to Argentina. **Turkey vultures** no longer soar over the prairie looking for carcasses, as colder temperatures have also chased them south. Before the **rough-legged hawks** arrive from arctic nesting grounds, we have the chance to see some short-distance migrants and some raptors just moving away from their nesting grounds.

While many species have very regular movements and habits, some are more unpredictable and are only occasional visitors.

Winter Roosts Unknown

Long-eared owls are one of the species that seems to appear each fall and stay only a few days before moving to their winter roost in parts unknown. While they have been documented throughout Wyoming, relatively little is known about them, and few people have seen them. The literature is full of phrases like "it appears" and "information is somewhat sketchy."

The more familiar **great-horned owl** advertises its presence with the stereotypical hoot. **Burrowing owls**, while small, are diurnal and, therefore, can be seen hunting in their prairie dog town colonies. **Short-eared owls** can be spotted during late afternoon hours hunting hayfields.

Long-eareds, on the other hand, are quiet unless at their nests and are strictly nocturnal. They hunt in open areas, dropping down on prey and killing with either their feet or bites to the neck but do so only at night, spending the day in forested areas.

Long Ear Tufts are Not Ears

The long-eared owl is a medium-sized owl measuring 13 to 16 inches in height with a wingspan of about 39 inches. They are much slimmer than great-horned owls and only weigh in the range of 250 grams (0.55 pounds). The long ear tufts set above bright-yellow eyes that give the species its name are not ears at all but merely feathers. Their ears are at the edge of the flat face and are large relative to their body size. The ears give the birds exceptional hearing as they hunt small mammals. A long-eared owl in flight does not show any sign of the ear tufts, which can make them difficult to identify.



A threatened long-eared owl displays a menacing posture.

Some crisp, fall morning you may wake to the sound of songbirds screaming loudly and see them diving into a tree or bush, or, you may discover an apparent broken branch in a tree or on a fence. Both could be due to the presence of a long-eared owl. Though 95 percent of their diet is small mammals like mice, voles, and shrews, long-eareds are no friend to small birds.

Those birds will quickly mob an owl whose camouflage has failed. Diving and screaming, the smaller birds make sure the owl cannot sneak up on unsuspecting prey, and, if it is trying to sleep, it must go elsewhere to find rest.

Excellent at Camouflage

Long-eared owls' plumage is so cryptic they can sometimes hide in plain sight. They stand up tall and thin, close their eyes almost all the way, pull a wing around to hide their legs, and end up looking like a jagged, bark-covered branch. Unlike hawks, which tend to flush when people approach, owls rely on their camouflage and can sit in a good spot for hours. If the owl is threatened, it may fly but may give a threat display in return. The slim, upright bird suddenly becomes a broad semicircle of hissing, rocking menace almost unrecognizable as the same species.

I have a friend who has a long-eared owl appear each fall, spend part of a few days on her split-rail fence, and then disappear. Winter roosts can be comprised of dozens of birds, which remain silent and hidden and only hint at their presence with the regular dropping of pellets.

If you hear a great-horned owl or have one living near you, it is unlikely you will be treated to the sight of a long-eared owl, as the smaller birds often fall prey to the larger, opportunistic hunters, but the rest of us should keep a keen eye out for a glimpse of this mysterious and beautiful owl.

For more information about owls:

North American Owls: Biology and Natural History. (1988).

Paul A. Johnsgard. Smithsonian Institution Press, New York

Owls: The Silent Fliers. (1997). R.D. Lawrence. Firefly Books, Buffalo, N.Y.

The Book of Owls. (1993) Lewis Wayne Walker. University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas

Owls: Their Life and Behavior. (1990). Julio de la Torre. Crown Publishers, New York, 1990

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