

Discovering a Short-eared Nest at Beaverhill Lake, Alberta

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While conducting a study on bird species diversity and changing water levels at Beaverhill Lake Natural Area, Alberta, a Short-eared Owl nest was found. Following is an account of how the nest was discovered, to encourage other bird enthusiasts to search for these rare nests.

The Short-eared Owls were first seen on April 29, 2004 hunting along the old south lakeshore (Beaverhill Lake is almost dry at present). A berm exists where the previous lakeshore was. On many occasions over the following few weeks a pair of owls was observed hunting at dawn and dusk. Their swooping flight low over the fields was fascinating to watch.

On June 17, an intensive spot mapping bird survey began, however no owls were seen on the first day. The second survey on June 26 produced different results. As I walked one of the gridlines east to west, a male Short-eared Owl began soaring over me. It appeared to fly over like a Buteo, circling around high above the ground. When I neared the center of the gridline, the male initiated calling (barking sound). He continued flying over me, getting closer with more urgent barking noises as I continued my survey. Then from behind me, the female flushed from the ground about 200 meters away.

This cued me that she may have flushed from a nest. I immediately walked towards the area the female flushed from. This produced a strong response from both owls. The female flew close overhead, called, and wing clapped. I walked the area for about one half hour but was not able to locate the nest. I had to return to my survey, but decided to bring a second person to help search on another day.

On July 1, my husband Chuck and I searched about 200 square meters and found the nest site in about a half hour. The ground nest was located in tall grass (50 cm height) and was on flat ground. A few small willows (*Salix* sp.) were growing about 25 meters from the nest. There appeared to be no distinguishing vegetation or topography that indicated where the nest was located. The nest was located on the other side of an electric fence where cattle were grazing. The vegetation was flattened where the owls had been sitting and whitewash surrounded the edge, which was 30 cm in diameter.

The nest was empty, which was not surprising since young Short-eared Owls leave the nest at a very young age. Clark (1975) and Holt (1992) report young leaving the nest when 12-18 days old, but fledge at 28 to 35 days. We continued to search the area around the nest and were able to locate one young 92 meters northeast of the nest. The young owl was estimated to be about 13-15 days old (Holt and Leasure 1993). It sat very still, and lay as close to the ground as was possible. I picked it up to band it and it continued to lie very still. Young Short-eared Owls are known to play dead if caught in the open.



As a nomadic and irruptive species, the Short-eared Owl can be difficult to monitor for population trends (Clayton 2000). Short-eared Owls have declined in many areas across North America, particularly in the northeastern United States (Holt and Leasure 1993). In Alberta, this owl is listed as May Be At Risk because of declines in numbers in the prairie provinces and other parts of North America. The cause of these declines is unknown (Alberta Sustainable Resource Development 2001). Little information exists and very few nests have been found in Alberta.

If you find a Short-eared Owl nest, you can submit nest information to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory (BBO) through the Raptor Nest Card Program. This information will contribute to our knowledge of this relatively unknown owl. Nest cards are available for download from the BBO website at <http://www.beaverhillbirds.com/newraptorNESTCARD.pdf> . You can also contact Lisa Priestley at (780) 918-4804 or E-mail: lisa@beaverhillbirds.com.

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Along Short-eared Owl Street

The Short-eared Owl is one of a kind,
And if you search you can probably find.
A nest all full of small downy chicks,
This nest though is not made of sticks.

You look for the adults flying low,
They can really put on quite a show.
But when they disappear into the grass,
Then you can make a quick dash.

When they flush from the ground take a look,
These nests are not easy to find like a book.
A scrape on the ground is all you will discover,
Some white-wash surrounding but absolutely no cover.

And when the young leave from the nest,
You can try your utmost best,
To search for these camouflaged creatures,
They could be the hide and seek teachers.

Then report what you find to us here at BBO,
We can collect all the data and our knowledge will grow.

