

## A Short Tale of a Short-eared Owl

- Tara Worobetz

Since pursuing an interest in birding, my tendency has been to categorize bird species according to how likely it would be to actually see (and/or hear) one. In one category are the common birds, plentiful and predictable, and likely to be encountered with rather little effort on my part. Often just being somewhere and walking around a bit is likely to result in a sighting. In the other category are the “trickier” birds, those that require more effort, patience, and maybe even travel on my part, and even then, a sighting is not guaranteed. I had not given a lot of thought to the Short-eared Owl as, in my mind, it fit into the latter category. First, because owls tend to be among the more elusive of bird species, second, because I was under the impression they were more prevalent in the southern part of the province (to which I rarely venture) and third, because (I thought) Short-eared Owls are considered rare (or at least more rare than common).

Considering these perceptions, I was quite excited (if somewhat doubtful), when I began my summer employment at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory and the head bander, Matt, told me I would see Short-eared Owls for sure. He had worked at the observatory the previous year and had seen many. Of course, working at a bird observatory, I expected I would see a great variety of interesting birds over the course of the summer, but certainly was not holding my breath for owls, let alone Short-eared Owls. I did see great birds at the BBO, including Cinnamon Teals, a Say’s Phoebe, Black-and-White Warblers, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, and even Long-eared Owls, but with the end of July approaching and no Short-eared Owls in evidence, my skepticism (and disappointment) was growing. “Yea, I don’t know” Matt would say, “Last year we saw lots of them”. As I would be leaving the BBO in mid-August, I realized my chances of sighting a Short-eared Owl before I left were getting slimmer by the day.



Late one evening in early August, I was driving out to the BBO and I could just make out a lump in the middle of Rowan’s Route. I think I was hoping it would be an owl but thought it unlikely an owl would be sitting in the middle of a gravel road. As I approached closer, switching off the brights, I realized the lump was indeed an owl! I turned my lights off so it was only illuminated in the weak day lights-but I could see it perfectly; even the distinctive eye markings-it was a Short-eared Owl-right there in front of me! He didn’t budge, just looked to the right, then left at me, then right, and left at me, over and over. This was quite comical to watch, and I wondered what on earth he was doing, and if he was possibly injured. He wasn’t sitting on a kill as far as I could see but for whatever reason

had no intention of moving. I watched him for a time, probably smiling and laughing to myself, as I could hardly believe my luck. Eventually, deciding I should be on my way, I slowly pulled the car closer and closer, forcing him to fly off into the darkness.

In my experience, my most memorable wildlife sightings have been mostly accidental.

They've occurred not when I'm out specifically looking, but when I've just happened to be out and about for any reason other than birds (although I acknowledge that birders always have their eyes open for anything, and therefore can never be considered not birding). I find that memories of an encounter are much more vivid and exciting if I've only encountered that species once. Because the sighting was so unexpected and rare, it stands out in my mind so clearly compared to those species I've been lucky enough to spot more often. Unless Short-eared Owls suddenly start posing for me on a regular basis, I think this encounter will remain among my most treasured wildlife memories for a long while to come.