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Notes on the Owls Found in Lincoln County, Nebraska

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North Platte Bird Club

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**NOTES
ON THE
OWLS**



**Found In
LINCOLN COUNTY,
NEBRASKA » » »**

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Owls of Lincoln County, Nebraska

During more than a quarter of a century I have been making notes and collecting information about the Owls of Lincoln county and it seemed an opportune time to put this information into print that it might be available to those who are interested in birds and serve as a basis for further study and amplification. Lincoln County is not usually considered a favorable place for Owls to reside on account of the absence of heavy timber over most of its area. But the nine varieties listed will probably be extended as more observations are made by those who are qualified to make the nice distinctions required

My thanks are due to the folks who have assisted by bringing specimens to me for identification and study and in most cases due credit is given. I have never killed an Owl and would not want anyone else to kill one for me but I would be glad at any time to have the privilege of seeing any specimen which might be caught alive or found dead. Such specimens in the hands of one who knows about Owls might be of much value to bird students if the information is recorded.

Wilson Tout,
North Platte, Nebraska.

January, 1935.

Order STRIGIFORMES Owls

Nine species of Owls belonging to eight genera are known to have been found in Lincoln County to date. They are—

Genus Tyto.....	Barn Owl
Genus Otus.....	Screech Owl
Genus Bubo.....	Horned Owl
Genus Nyctea.....	Snowy Owl
Genus Speotyto.....	Burrowing Owl
Genus Strix.....	Barred Owl
Genus Asio.....	Long-eared Owl and
.....	Short-eared Owl
Genus Cryptoglaux.....	Saw-whet Owl

AMERICAN BARN OWL
***Tyto alba pratincola* (Bonaparte)**

DATA—The Barn Owl is a permanent resident of Lincoln county. I have records for almost every month of the year. There have been some years when I did not see or hear of a Barn Owl here and during other years I have made several records. This owl is often called the "Monkey-faced Owl."

RANGE—Barn Owls are seldom found in Canada or in the northern tier of states in this country. Their range however extends south to the Gulf and into Old Mexico. They are found over all of Nebraska which is near their northern range.

PERSONAL—Claude Wilson brought me a dead American Barn Owl on August 16, 1916. He had dug out a nest and taken the young birds home but all of them had died. The nest was in a hole in the side of one of the canyons at the Experimental Substation south of the city.

Henry Clark caught a female Barn Owl while it was struggling in the water of the North Platte river. It had evidently just gotten into the water and was still in fighting trim when he caught it. He brought it to the city and it was seen by many people at the Hans Johnson home on North Walnut street. The next day after being caught it laid an egg.

Ed Davis showed me a Barn Owl in the crotch of one of the tall trees in his yard on west Third street on the evening of August 9, 1933. He said it had been in the same place since before noon when they first saw it. Shortly afterward it had been discovered by the Blue Jays and they had kept up a fuss about it all afternoon. It was still there at dark.

Some men who were excavating on the side of a hill near the Municipal Airport dug out a Barn Owl and its nest containing five young owls. The owlets were taken to the Airport where they were given to one of the pilots who took them to Omaha. The story with a picture appeared in the Omaha Bee-News of July 9, 1929.

I found a Barn Owl's nest in a hole in a bank overlooking the North Platte river on April 9, 1933. Both of the adult owls left the hole which faced the south and contained two eggs. The opening was about ten feet above the water level in the river and about two feet below the level of the ground above. I could see into the nest but I could not quite reach the eggs.

EASTERN SCREECH OWL
Otus asio naevius (Gmelin)

Data—The Eastern Screech Owl is a permanent resident here in Lincoln county, being seen during all of the months of the year. It is not a common bird at best, partly because of the lack of trees to furnish suitable nesting places and partly because Lincoln county is so near the limit of its range.

RANGE—It is found over the whole of the Eastern part of the United States and west to the plains. It is replaced by the western forms in the foothills and heights of the Rocky mountains. It is said to be the best known owl in the United States because it lives in the cities and towns in close relation with people.

PERSONAL—One of the pupils in the primary room of the 1st Ward school brought one of these little owls to school on Nov. 24, 1909. The owl had broken a wing and the pupil said it was caught about three miles west of the city.

While at dinner at our home on the evening of April 27, 1915 we heard a lot of clamor among the Robins in the trees in our yard and upon investigating we found an Eastern Screech Owl in one of the trees. The owl flew away shortly but it was a long time before the Robins were tranquil again.

Royer Hastings brought me a live Eastern Screech Owl on April 5, 1916. We kept it a while but it would not eat so we let it loose.

GREAT HORNED OWL
Bubo virginianus virginianus (Gmelin)

DATA—The Great Horned Owl, or one or more of its subspecies, is a resident of Lincoln county. It has been recorded during nearly every month of the year. It is found in the timber along the Platte river and its branches and in the wooded canyons extending back from the valley.

RANGE—Lincoln county is near the extreme western range of the Great Horned Owl. Three of the subspecies extend their ranges into Nebraska from the northwest and the west and

it will take further study to determine which are found here.

PERSONAL—John Phifer, living at the mouth of Moran canyon caught a young Horned Owl and tamed it. He named it "Major" but he could not keep it from taking his chickens so he had to cage it. He had it on exhibition at the Lincoln County Fair in September, 1929.

Charles Freiberg brought me a dead Horned Owl which he shot, November 14, 1914 in the alley back of his home here in the city. It was late in the afternoon and the sunlight in his eyes made him think it was a hawk which had been getting his mother's chickens.

Some boys living near Brady saw a Horned Owl and threw a stick at it, breaking its leg. This was in September, 1931. They caught it and took it to Dr. Schneider at Brady because they knew he was much interested in all forms of wild life. He set the leg and bound it with splints. He kept the bird in a cage and one day after the splints had been taken off, Emil Merscheid, North Platte florist, saw the bird and asked if he could exhibit it in his Flower Shop window. He put the cage in the window and many people stopped in front of the window to observe the bird as it blinked at them.

SNOWY OWL

***Nyctea nyctea* (Linnaeus)**

DATA—The Snowy Owl is a rare winter visitor in Lincoln county with reports of their being more common in early days.

RANGE—This bird is found in the far north and migrates south to the northern tier of states in the United States during the winter. The books tell of irregular migrations into the interior of the country during certain seasons with long periods when the owls are absent.

PERSONAL—The only record I have of this Owl was in January 1922 when a Union Pacific engineer, whose name I have misplaced, brought a dead Snowy Owl to me. He said he was out on his engine at Ogallala sometime after midnight and it was not there but when he reached North Platte sometime later, it was found dead on the cow-catcher. He thought it had been attracted by the headlight and was killed when the engine hit it.

WESTERN BURROWING OWL
***Speotyto cunicularia hypugaea* (Bonaparte)**

DATA—The Burrowing Owl is a summer resident in Lincoln county according to my records and as far as I can learn from other sources. The earliest spring date is May 1, 1927 and the latest fall date is October 13, 1929. This gives a residence of 166 days. It is usually, although not always, found associated with the "towns" of the Black-tailed Prairie-dog.

RANGE—This owl is found throughout the plains region from the Pacific Ocean to the Mississippi River and from interior Canada to lower Mexico. It is a migrant over the northern part of its range.

PERSONAL—We found a pair of Burrowing Owls occupying a hole in the ground in what is now Cody Park inside the city limits, on July 10, 1917. There were no Prairie-dogs in the neighborhood.

During each summer from 1918 to 1928 I visited a pasture on the bench at the east side of the Experimental Substation south of the city and always flushed several of these owls from abandoned Prairie-dog burrows. Sometimes the Prairie-dogs were occupying nearby quarters. When the men at the Substation destroyed the Prairie-dogs the owls disappeared.

During the summer of 1927, 1928 and 1929 at least two pairs of Western Burrowing Owls occupied abandoned Prairie-dog burrows in the McDonald meadows just southwest of the city and between the rivers.

Eunice Woodcock brought me a dead Burrowing Owl on May 4, 1920. She said she found it near her home on the table south of the South Platte River.

On October 3, 1927, I examined a large number of pellets near a burrow used by Burrowing Owls and found the pellets were composed almost entirely of chitinous parts of large grasshoppers.

NORTHERN BARRED OWL
***Strix varia varia* Barton**

DATA—This bird is a rare straggler from the East. All of my records are in the winter and early spring and it may

be that it is not a regular resident. It is the "Hoot Owl" of the eastern states and lives in the timber there.

RANGE—The Northern Barred Owl ranges from Canada to the Southern states and west to Wyoming and Colorado, where it is a straggler and very rare Swenk says it is a common resident eastwardly in Nebraska.

PERSONAL—I flushed four Northern Barred Owls from a meadow near the Union Pacific railroad bridge over the North Platte river just east of the city on January 19, 1925. Three of them were on the ground or perched in scrubby brush close to the ground and one was plainly in sight on a higher limb. I watched them for some time before they flew away. It was a dark day with plenty of snow and the snow prints showed many mice runways. There was a cold north wind.

I found a dead Barred Owl on May 1, 1927, near the North Platte river bridge. It had been badly mangled but the head was not disfigured and it was easily identified.

LONG-EARED OWL

Asio wilsonianus (Lesson)

DATA—The Long-eared Owl is a permanent resident in Lincoln county. Individuals may migrate further south during the winter but if that is the case, other individuals from further north take their places here. At least my records in March, June, August and December would tend to confirm this idea. Owing to the scarcity of big timber in this county, one would not expect to find very many of these big-timber owls here and I have found them to be uncommon.

RANGE—These owls are found well up into Canada during the summer but only in Southern Canada during the winter. And they are seldom recorded from the southern tier of states in this country during the summer but are found well into Mexico during the winter.

PERSONAL—A grain sack was left in the outer room of my office on April 16, 1917 which contained a dead Long-eared Owl and another owl. I never found out who left it there nor the details of their capture.

A Long-eared Owl watched me intently from its perch near

the trunk of a large tree in a grove near the North Platte river here on November 11, 1927. It did not pay any attention to the scolding of a flock of House Sparrows and did not fly until I approached within a few feet of it.

I saw a Long-eared Owl in a grove near the North Platte river on November 11, 1934. It was facing the late afternoon sun. I approached it close enough to enjoy the reddish-brown facial discs and the large yellow eyes. It let me get within thirty feet of it before it flew.

SHORT-EARED OWL

Asio flammeus flammeus (Pontoppidan)

DATA—This bird is found in suitable places in Nebraska where it is a permanent resident. It is found in meadows and open places in the Platte valley here in Lincoln county and is recorded for almost every month in the year.

RANGE—It is resident from Alaska to Greenland and south to California and Kansas. It winters as far south as Louisiana and Cuba. It is local in its distribution.

PERSONAL—ON March 5, 1916 we found a dead adult Short-eared Owl near the cemetery where it had been left after being shot.

I was in the McDonald meadow south of the city when I saw a pair of Short-eared Owls on January 23, 1922 in the air. They would fly at each other and then attempt to get an advantage by getting above the other, each of them trying for such a position. Occasionally they would grapple when they would fall through the air only to release any hold they might have just before reaching the earth and again each would try for the coveted position.

I found a dead Short-eared Owl in the meadow south of the city near Fremont creek. Its back had been partly eaten away. This was on November 24, 1929. I had been out in the meadow on several mornings during the summer and watched the Short-eared Owls flying high above me and giving their sharp cry and had looked for hours for the nest but did not find it.

SAW-WHET OWL
***Cryptoglaux acadica acadica* (Gmelin)**

DATA—The Saw-whet is a resident in Lincoln county although it is not often seen here. It probably nests here as it has been recorded during the summer.

RANGE—Breeding throughout southern Canada and south to Mexico and east through the northern states, it is found throughout Nebraska but is nowhere common.

PERSONAL—Lawrence Hart and Royer Hastings brought me a live Saw-whet Owl on December 2, 1915. They had caught it in the belfry of the Presbyterian church. It was wounded and after looking it over we let it loose.

We heard the hoarse cry of the Saw-whet in the trees at our home on September 7, 1929 and after a search we discovered the bird. It made that horrible cry from which it gets its name and shortly flew away.

I found a dead Saw-whet Owl on the pavement of the Lincoln highway on December 25, 1931. The head was missing and the body had been run over by auto wheels until it was almost flat. The wing and foot were brought home.

It was January 17, 1932 that I stopped near a willow thicket on the Bird Refuge east of the city and saw a Saw-whet Owl peek around the trunk of a small cottonwood tree. It seemed to be trying to locate an intruder. When it saw me it flew quickly away.



» Our Field «

Lincoln County, Nebraska is located in the plains region just west of the 100th meridian and north of the 40th parallel. The North and South forks of the Platte unite near the center of the county to form the Platte river which flows east. The river valleys are fertile and trees grow there readily. There are few tributaries to the Platte. North of this valley is typical sand hill country with a similar terrain south of the valley until the watershed of the Republican is reached. The southeast part of the county is cut with deep canyons. The county is 48 miles from north to south and 54 miles from east to west and contains 1,600,000 acres. There are no natural lakes in the county.

The United States Weather Bureau station located at North Platte recorded 72% of sunshine during 1934. The average wind velocity is 9.1 miles per hour and the average rainfall is 18.36 inches annually. The city is 2,800 feet above sea level.

North Platte, the county seat, has a population of more than 12,000 people. It is located between the forks of the Platte river on the main line of the Union Pacific railroad, on the Lincoln highway and on the Transcontinental Air Mail route.