

Birds of Prey

Illinois' **birds of prey**, or **raptors**, fall into two basic groups: nocturnal (night time) hunters: owls and diurnal (day time) hunters: hawks, harriers, kites, falcons, eagles, osprey, and vultures. Birds of prey have a unique set of adaptations that set them apart from all other bird species. Being meat eaters, they possess hooked beaks adapted for tearing apart food, powerful feet with sharp, curved claws or talons for killing their prey, and keen eyesight. In addition, birds of prey have similar reproductive and foraging habits and are vulnerable to the stresses brought about by environmental pollutants.

Below is a list of the birds of prey found in Shelby County:

Diurnal Hunters-Hawks

Turkey Vulture	Osprey
Bald Eagle	Golden Eagle
Northern Harrier	Northern Goshawk
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Cooper's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk	Red-tailed Hawk
Broad Winged Hawk	Rough-legged Hawk

Nocturnal Hunters- Owls

Eastern Screech Owl	Great Horned Owl
Barred Owl	Long-eared Owl
Short-eared Owl	Snowy Owl
Northern Saw-whet Owl	

All true raptors have a hooked beak, excellent eyesight, strong legs and feet, and sharp talons. The beak of a raptor sets it apart from other birds; it is curved at the tip with sharp cutting edges to tear off pieces of its prey that will easily fit into its mouth.

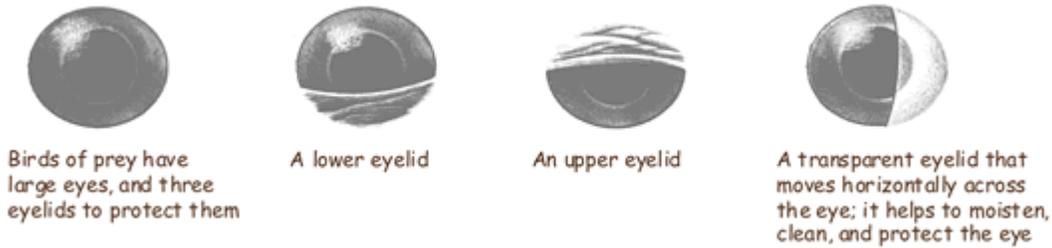
Birds of prey have powerful leg and toe muscles that, when combined with their sharp talons, make their feet lethal weapons, perfectly designed to catch, hold, and carry prey. The length and size of a raptor's toes, and the curvature and thickness of its talons are related to the type of prey it pursues.

Being characterized as eagle-eyed implies having superior vision, but, even at our very best, we humans can't begin to compete with the birds. They have the best vision of any animal on earth, and raptors are the avian champs. A Golden Eagle can easily spot a jackrabbit a mile away. What makes this visual feat so impressive is not the distance alone, but how well the eagle sees at that distance. This is called visual acuity and because of the eagle's amazing visual acuity it can not only see and identify that jackrabbit a mile away, it can also watch the rabbit's sides expand and contract with each breath. From a quarter-mile away, it can see the blink of the animal's eyes, the delicate twitch of its nose, and distinguish the individual hairs that make up its quivering whiskers. To put this in perspective, if the eagle could read and someone held up a Chicago Tribune a quarter-mile away, the eagle would know what the day's headlines were. We, on the other hand, would just barely be able to make out some fool standing in the middle of the desert with a big white obstruction in front of his/her face

Raptors are believed to have the keenest eyesight in nature because of the size of the eyeball and the eye muscles designed for rapid focus. Diurnal raptors have full color vision. Nocturnal raptors, the owls, have remarkably sharp night vision.

Nocturnal raptors, the owls, have an added advantage over other raptors with their excellent night vision. Owls have a concentration of more rods in their eyes that are essential for seeing under low light conditions. An owl's eyes are also located in the front of their heads, much like humans. By contrast, the night vision of

diurnal raptors is no better than a human's vision at night. Unlike other birds raptors have a special eyelid or nictitating membrane.



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This special transparent eyelid closes laterally across the eye and is used to

- keep the eyes moist
- protect the eyes during flight
- protect the eyes when feeding themselves or their young

A form of eye protection in most raptors is a bony shield that projects above the eye. The bony shield adds protection when raptors pursue prey into brush, protects the eyes from injury while hunting, and also gives the raptors a menacing appearance.

Let's look at the general characteristics and then the specific groups that fall under the broad category of hawks: Osprey, Harrier, Accipiters, Buteos, Eagles, and Falcons.

Osprey

The Osprey family contains only 1 species. Ospreys are large, long-legged, eagle-like, fish-eating raptors. They are different from other raptors primarily in their specialized adaptations for catching fish.

Osprey, sometimes called "fish hawks," rarely nest in Illinois but are seen during migration at Lake Shelbyville.

The state-endangered Osprey is the only species in its family and, unlike other such birds, is found on every continent except Antarctica.

Many birds of prey can be identified by their feet alone because of specialized characteristics that have evolved to help them catch their preferred prey as economically as possible. The osprey is one such bird. This is a fish eater, a bird that dives feet-first into rivers and lakes, sometimes completely submerging its body to secure its meal. Its opposable toes allow it to more firmly grip its slippery,

wiggling prey when flying to shore; the fish is always carried in the same manner - facing head first to provide a streamlined shape for easier flight.

Each of an osprey's toes is armed with long, sharply curved talons that resemble fish hooks, another adaptation peculiar to this unique raptor. Even the bottoms of an osprey's toes are designed for fish catching. They are very rough to the touch because of the small wart-like projections called spicules that cover them. This sandpaper-like texture gives the bird a surer grasp.



Osprey

Harriers

There are 10 species of harriers worldwide but only one species in North America, the Northern Harrier also known as the "Marsh Hawk".

The Northern Harrier is a medium-sized, slim raptor with long legs and tail, and a white rump patch at the base of the upper tail.

Northern Harriers live in open areas and build minimal grassy nests on the ground; they hunt for rodents, small birds and insects in fields, meadows, and marshes.

This raptor has a distinctive hunting flight called "coursing." It can be seen flying low over the ground following the contours of the land and holding its wings in a V-shape.

Unlike other daytime raptors, the harrier has a facial ruff that helps to focus sound toward the ears.

Most species are sexually dimorphic, meaning that the male and female of the species are different colors and size. The female harrier is larger in size and brown and white in color; the male is smaller with gray under wings and black wingtips.

Northern Harrier "Marsh Hawk"

OK, aviation buffs, which came first: the harrier or the harrier? The harrier jet, which can take-off and land vertically, was named for this grassland hawk. Harrier actually means "hunter." This bird will systematically hunt a field by flying back and forth in a pattern known as "quartering." When it believes a meal is below, it may hover patiently above.

A white tail patch gives the harrier away even to the novice observer. The white patch is just above the tail on the back. If the bird is flying away from you, it should be very apparent. It is present in all plumages. Harriers also have a facial disk, much like an owl. They are often seen roosting with short-eared owls. Loss of habitat, primarily prairie and marsh, is probably the reason Northern Harriers seldom nest in Illinois. They can, however, be seen during migration.



Northern Harrier white rump patch



Facial Disc



Male Northern Harrier hunting



Female Northern Harrier

Accipiters

Accipiters are small to medium-sized raptors with short, rounded wings and long tails useful for speed and maneuvering in forested habitats.

There are three species of accipiters found in North America. Only two, the Cooper's hawk and the Sharp Shinned Hawk are found in Illinois.

Adult accipiters typically have dark gray backs, barred or streaked breasts and tails, red eyes, and long toes. Young accipiters typically have brown backs, streaked breasts, and yellow eyes.

Their flight pattern includes rapid wing beats alternating with longer glides, and occasionally soaring.

Accipiters are fierce, stealthy hunters; their diet consists mostly of other birds and small mammals.

Cooper's hawk and Sharp Shinned Hawk

Cooper's Hawks and Sharp shinned Hawks prey mostly on other birds. Their long tails act as rudders that allow them to be extremely maneuverable in wooded areas as they hunt birds on the wing. The Cooper's hawk is about the size of a crow. Of its relatives, the Sharp-shinned Hawk is slightly smaller and the Northern Goshawk is larger.

The Cooper's hawk was recently removed from the State Endangered Species List. Recovery is partially due to the fact that the Cooper's hawk has adapted to urban and suburban environment as shown in this



photo.



Cooper's hawk



Sharp Shinned Hawk

Buteos

Buteos are medium to large, stout bodied hawks, identified by their broad wings and fan shaped tails.

These raptors are soaring hawks, but also hover or fly low along areas where prey is found.

The Broad-winged Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and the Rough-legged Hawk are buteos found in Illinois.

Their diet consists primarily of small mammals, but as a group they will capture a wide variety of prey. You often can see this type of raptor perched on large limbs of trees, utility poles, or fences

Broad-winged Hawk

Broad-winged hawks belong to the same family as the common Red-tailed Hawk, but are smaller. They are not much larger than a crow. Broad-winged hawks are most often seen in Illinois at migration time when they may form huge flocks. Their migrations are very precise, usually occurring in mid-April and mid-September. Most of the hawks passing through Illinois have bred in Canada, Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin. They prefer to rest in heavily forested areas, but may be seen in parks as well. Soaring groups of birds circle together in formations known as "kettles."

Note the vertically aligned chest markings as compared to the horizontal "belly band" of the red-tailed hawk shown below in picture on the right.



Broad-winged Hawk

Red Shouldered Hawk



The Red-shouldered Hawk prefers wetter habitats compared with the closely related Red-tailed Hawk. Heard more often than it is seen, the Red-shouldered Hawk nests in mature forests, in bottomland swamps and river bottoms, hunting in woodlands rather than over open fields. Its loud, shrieking “kee-yar” call can be heard half a mile away and sometimes farther. Disturbance, habitat loss and pesticide use have led to the decline of this hawk. The Red-shouldered Hawk is a year round breeding resident of southern Illinois; however, those birds found in northern and central Illinois in winter are most likely birds that have migrated from the north.

Red Tailed Hawk



The Red-tailed Hawk, a common hawk in Illinois, can be found year round, especially in open fields near woodlands. An afternoon drive through the country often reveals resident Red-tailed Hawks perching on exposed tree limbs, fence posts or utility poles overlooking open fields and roadsides.

In flight, the red-tail often soars with few wing flaps. Mature red-tails have an easily recognized rusty red tail; the tail of the immature is banded but not red. Adults are mostly white underneath, with a “belly band” of dark feathers crossing the chest. Females are slightly larger than the male. During spring courtship, Red-tailed Hawks dive at each other, sometimes locking talons and tumbling through the air together.

The Red-tailed Hawk has an impressive, piercing call that television commercials and movies often misrepresent by pairing it with the image of an eagle.

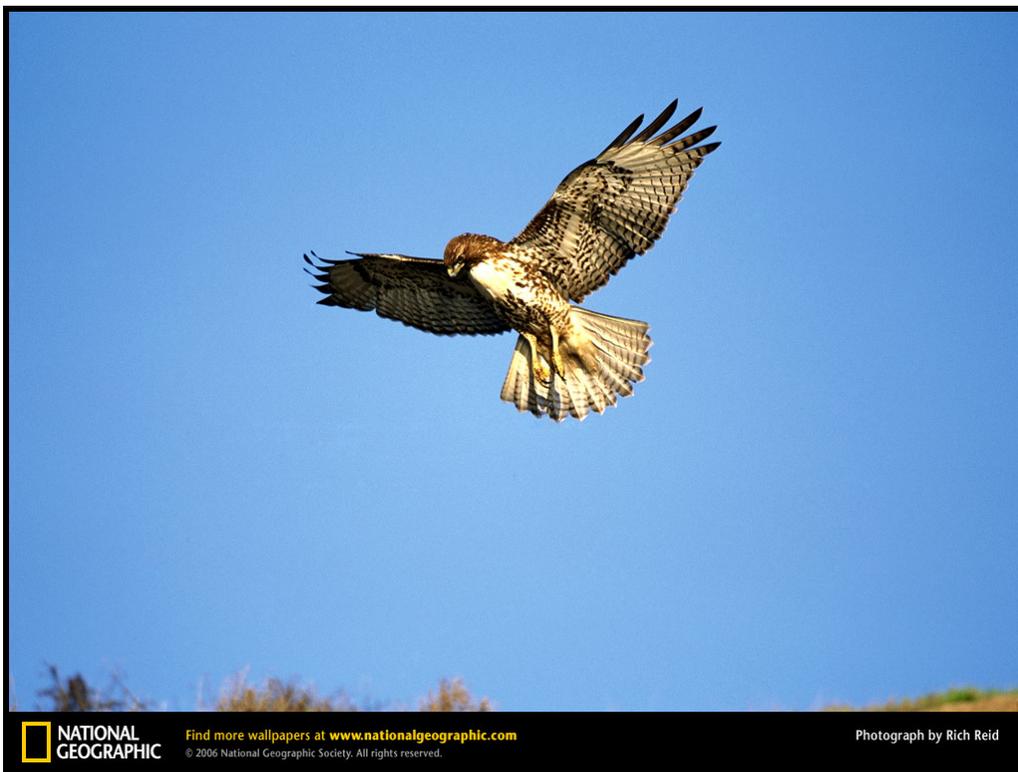
dark belly band;



courtship dance



Immature in flight



Rough-Legged Hawk



The Rough-legged Hawk nests in the Arctic and passes through Illinois during migration. It is a common winter resident, present most often in the northern part of the state. We often see rough-legs on their first migration because they are encountering civilization, including cars, buildings and power lines, for the first time.

As you can imagine, this is a very dangerous time for them. One difference between Red-tailed Hawks and Rough-legged Hawks is in the feathering of the legs. Rough-legged hawks have feathers all the way down to their feet, while Red-tails do not.

Photos by Chris Young

Eagles

Two eagle species are widespread in North America, the Golden Eagle and the Bald Eagle. The Bald Eagle is a fairly common sight at Lake Shelbyville; however

the Golden Eagle, common in the western states, is sometimes seen in Illinois along the Mississippi River during migration. Eagles are large and dark, with proportionally longer wings than the smaller Buteos, which they resemble in flight. Both species are similar in size with the females being larger than the males; they are usually found near water.

Bald Eagle

The bald eagle is an American wildlife success story. Almost extinct due to hunting, habitat loss and the effects of pesticides like DDT, the bald eagle has made a stunning recovery. At one time there were an estimated 500,000 Bald Eagles in the United States. In 1963 there were only 400 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states, today there are 10,000 nesting pairs. In 2007, the Bald Eagle was removed from the Federal Endangered Species List. On June 28, 2007, the Interior Department took the American bald eagle off the Endangered Species List. The bald eagle will still be protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. The Bald Eagle Protection Act prohibits the take, transport, sale, barter, trade, import and export, and possession of eagles, making it illegal for anyone to collect eagles and eagle parts, nests, or eggs without a permit. Native Americans are able to possess these emblems which are traditional in their culture.

Bald eagles nest in the northern United States and Canada, migrating south during the winter when rivers and lakes freeze. They are often seen at locks and dams where water remains open year all winter for fishing. Except for Alaska, more Bald Eagles winter in Illinois than in any other state. Bald eagles are an important tourist draw for river communities. Many river towns host eagle-watching festivals in winter.

Eagle nests are giant collections of sticks called eyries. They add to the nests each year until they are several feet across.

It takes up to five years for bald eagles to acquire their bright white head and tail feathers. Immature bald eagles are often assumed to be females, when in fact, both adult males and females have white heads and tails.

In captivity, a bald eagle may live to be 50 years old. In the wild, only about one in ten bald eagles that fledge live to reach maturity.



Bald Eagle scream





Golden Eagle



With the increase of human populations and intensive agricultural practices, the golden eagle became a victim of a lengthy persecution. Golden Eagles were shot by the hundreds in the western states of Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico because ranchers blamed them for killing lambs and new born calves... Up to the early 1960's ranchers paid bounties of \$25 or more to pilots-for-hire who shot Golden Eagles in the air. Strychnine bait stations put out by ranchers and the federal government to protect livestock from coyotes indiscriminately killed untold numbers of Golden Eagles and other birds of prey.

The Golden Eagle is an impressive predator, taking animals as large as foxes and herons. The best chance to see this rare species is in winter in extreme southern Illinois.

Golden eagles get their name from the golden colored feathers on the nape of their necks. The gold color is most apparent in bright sunlight. Although the adult Golden Eagle is uniformly colored, except for its tawny head, the immature is readily distinguished by the white patch in the center of each wing and at the base of the tail. Golden eagles do not congregate in groups like bald eagles. They are seen alone or in pairs, sometimes over open country.



Falcons

Falcons are a group of hawks that vary in size from small to medium; they are identified by their large head, notched beak, dark eyes, and distinct stripe(s) below their eyes called malar stripes.

Each member of the falcon family from the small 5 oz. kestrel to the large 4 lb. gyrfalcon has a beak with the same distinctive feature, a tomial tooth. The tomial tooth is located on the outer-edge of the upper mandible near the curved part of the beak and is a triangular-shaped downward pointing projection that fits into a corresponding notch on the lower mandible. With this tomial tooth falcons are able to quickly dispatch their prey by biting through the neck vertebrae and severing the spinal column.

Falcons are powerful fliers and divers with long, narrow, pointed wings and long tails. Among the most aerial and acrobatic of the raptors their flight ability is legendary; scientists say these raptors can fly at speeds of over 200 miles per hour!

These raptors do not build their nests, but scrape out spots on cliffs or in cavities and typically live in open country.

Two falcon species can be found in our region, they are the American Kestrel, and the Peregrine Falcon.

It is this group of birds around which the sport of "falconry" revolves. Falconry is an art or sport which involves the use of trained raptors (birds of prey) to hunt or pursue game for humans.

Peregrine Falcon

Because it can reach speeds of almost 200 miles per hour when diving for prey, the Peregrine Falcon has been called the fastest animal on earth. Unfortunately, the peregrine was nearly wiped out by the mid-1960's by exposure to DDT*, habitat loss, hunting and other factors.

Thanks to recovery efforts, the peregrine is now poised to be upgraded from endangered to threatened.

Peregrine falcons are primarily cliff dwellers, but will nest in hollow trees. Birds that have been introduced into the wild have found suitable homes in cities like Chicago and St. Louis, where ledges on tall buildings have substituted for cliffs. City-dwelling pigeons and starlings provide plenty of food



Peregrine Falcon

***DDT** was originally created in 1873. Only when its use as an insecticide was discovered in 1939, however, did it come into widespread use. The scientist who made this discovery was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1948. After World War II, it became especially popular due to its effectiveness against mosquitoes that spread malaria and lice that carried typhus. The World Health Organization estimated that

25 million lives were saved because of its use. Problems soon surfaced, however, as many insects began to develop resistance to the insecticide. It was also discovered to be highly toxic to fish.

Because it does not break down easily, DDT builds up in the fatty tissues. Animals that ingest it carry it for some time. It takes an animal eight years to metabolize one half of the DDT it consumes. Birds, like the bald eagle, ingested DDT after eating contaminated fish. The DDT caused the bird's eggshells to be brittle and thin and to break easily. Eggs often were broken in the nest when the parents sat on them during incubation. This was one of the reasons populations declined to dangerous levels.

DDT was banned in the United States in 1973, although it is still used in other parts of the world. Birds that migrate to other continents are still at risk. *Primary source: University of Oxford, Department of Chemistry*

American Kestrel

The American Kestrel is the smallest falcon found in Illinois. About the size of a Cardinal, it is often called a Sparrow Hawk. It is commonly seen year around in Shelby County often hunting from fence posts and telephone lines along roadways. Interstate travelers often see them hovering in place over grassy medians. The spectacular aerial display of a kestrel in pursuit of a dragonfly is a sight to behold.

American Kestrels appear to have eyes in the backs of their heads! These eyespots probably fool predators into thinking that the kestrel will be too difficult to catch and eat because it has already seen its attacker.





American Kestrel

Sexes are different in color. The male, (left) has slate blue-gray wings and less streaking on its chest. The female (right) is heavily streaked with reddish brown wings is larger than the male.

Turkey Vulture



Turkey vultures are large soaring birds that, at first glance, because of their size, might be mistaken for an eagle. At a distance, one can tell a turkey vulture because it soars with few wing flaps and holds its wings in a slight "V" position. Eagles soar with wings flat and level. Large black birds that flap continuously are probably crows.

Of all the birds of prey, the vulture's toes least meet the criteria for raptorial classification. They are more closely related to herons and storks. Their toes are weak, poorly padded and have only slightly curved talons. A vulture's foot looks more like a turkey's than a hawk's. The foot reflects the life-style of the bird. The vulture is a scavenger and as such does not have to catch and kill its prey. A vulture's diet consists mostly of carrion, dead meat, which they spot from the air by sight and smell. What it must do, is securely balance itself on a carcass so it can feed. The vulture's large feet get the job done, but in the process often get dirty. Cleaning them, however, isn't as difficult because the vulture's toes and tarsi are completely featherless.

Studies reveal that vultures won't find carrion on the day that it is killed, but almost always find it on the second or third day when it has begun to rot, and will rarely visit a kill on the fourth day when it is in a state of full-blown foul smell.

Vultures are basically mute except for wheezes, hisses or snorts that can be heard at very close range.

Turkey vultures characteristically nest in caves in cliffs or in hollow logs or other sheltered locations on the ground. Turkey vultures are becoming more numerous in central Illinois and are frequently seen around Lake Shelbyville.



Owls

Owl species vary in size, but typically have large, round heads, with forward-facing eyes, wide wings, short tails, lightweight bodies, and unusually soft, fluffy body feathers.

An owl's diet consists of rodents and small mammals. Their digestive system makes use of the nutritious portions of the prey; the undigested parts (hair, bones, claws, teeth, etc.) are regurgitated in the form of a pellet often found at the base of a roosting tree.

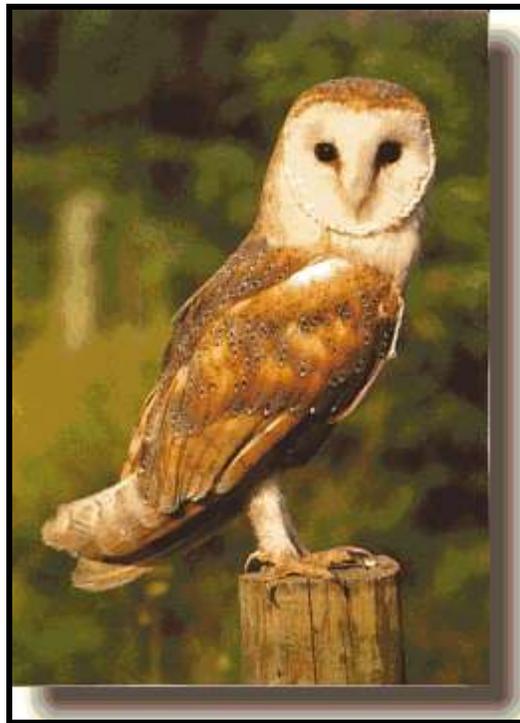
Owls have soft-edged flight feathers that allow them to fly almost silently; the flight feathers of an owl are slightly spaced to allow air to move around and through them when flying which helps to reduce noise.

Some owls have tufts of feathers on the tops of their head, often erroneously referred to as horns or ears.

Owls have large asymmetrical ear holes located behind the eyes on each side of the face, underneath their feathers, which aid in hearing and flight direction to catch prey. Asymmetrical ear holes means that one ear is located higher or lower than the other; therefore, each ear catches sound at a different time allowing for pinpoint accuracy of prey location.

Owls have binocular vision; their eyes are fixed in sockets so they are only able to see what is in front of them; therefore to see the things around them, owls must use the added bones in their neck (14 total) to rotate their head approximately 270° in one direction - **NOT IN A COMPLETE CIRCLE!**

Barn Owl



Up until the early 1950's, small towns and most farms in Illinois had Barn Owls. Several factors contributed to this bird's rapid decline and placement on the state endangered list. Pesticides killed its rodent prey and even the owls themselves. The chemicals also caused the bird's eggs to crack before they hatched or to not hatch at all. In addition, humans indiscriminately shot these owls and converted much of their favorite hayfield feeding grounds to corn and soybean fields. Strictly nocturnal, the Barn Owl can easily catch prey in absolute darkness. Its asymmetrically placed ear openings, along with its heart-shaped facial disc, help it zero in on prey without having to see. Like other cavity nesting birds, they rely on dead trees to provide nest sites. Barn owls will substitute an old barn for a nest site, when cavities are not available. Many people confuse Barred and Barn Owls, possibly because the two words sound alike. In Illinois, you are much more likely to see and hear a Barred Owl than a Barn Owl. Barred Owls hoot and Barn Owls hiss.

Barred Owl



"Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?" is the signature call of this common owl of the lowland woods. Many people refer to them simply as "hoot owls." During courtship, the calls of the species become much more complicated and lengthy, often escalating into frenzies of manic hoots, hollers and cackles that some observers have described as caterwauling.

While they appear similar in size to the great horned owl, Barred owls are not nearly as powerful, possessing smaller talons and weighing only about one pound. They are made up mostly of feathers!

Great horned owls have large feather tufts on their heads and have large yellow eyes. Barred owls have dark eyes and no feather tufts.

Eastern Screech Owl



The diminutive Eastern Screech-owl, 8- 9 inches in length with a 21 inch wing span, is a year-round resident of deciduous woodlands; its presence is rarely detected by humans. Most screech-owls sleep during the day inside tree cavities, artificial nest boxes or conifers, especially small red cedars.

Chickadees, titmice, nuthatches and woodpeckers, which also nest in tree cavities mob screech-owls when members of their flock are preyed upon, alerting a birder to an owl's presence during the day.

More commonly, you will find this owl by listening for the male's eerie, horse "whinny" courtship call and loud trills and tremolos at night.

Eastern screech owls are found in gray and red color phases. Owls of both phases may pair up, and the chicks may be of either color or mixed (some red and some gray in the same nest).

Because they require a hollow tree for nesting, they have been affected by the urbanization of rural areas and the clean manicuring of parks. In these settings, dead trees are normally removed. They will, however, use nest boxes provided by homeowners, or take over boxes built for other birds, such as wood ducks.

Great Horned Owl



Great Horned Owls are the largest and most fearsome of the owls found in Illinois. They are powerful hunters that eat a variety of prey, from insects and birds to small mammals. Anything it can catch and carry away is fair game. Perhaps its poorly developed sense of smell explains why it is a consistent predator of skunks. Because of their adaptability and versatility, Great Horned Owls are quite common. Great Horned Owls often begin their courtship as early as December, at which time their hooting calls make them quite conspicuous. A courting pair hoots back and forth; the female's hoot is lower and deeper in pitch. By February and March, females are already incubating their eggs.

Long-eared Owl



A winter visitor to Illinois, the Long-eared Owl remains hidden during the day, most often in conifers, but also in oaks and other deciduous trees that retain their leaves. To hide from an intruder, the Long-eared Owl flattens its body against a tree trunk to blend in with the tree bark.

The long-eared owl initially looks like a great horned owl because of its long feathered tufts. It is only about half the size of a great horned owl, however, and its habit of roosting in the deepest, darkest part of wooded areas mean it is rarely seen and hard to find.

Long-eared owls have declined over the years in Illinois, likely due to habitat loss. They have, until recently, been on the Illinois state endangered species list.

Northern Saw Whet Owl



In Illinois, the Northern Saw-whet Owl, a nocturnal, winter only resident, feeds almost exclusively on small mice, swooping down from a low perch in a cedar tree. It will also take small birds. The Saw-whet was named for its shrill, raspy call that resembles the sound of a saw being sharpened on an old-fashioned whetstone.

This owl can be remarkably tame, remaining still and quiet on its winter roost even when closely approached, relying on its camouflage to conceal its location.

Due to its small size it is hard to find and seldom seen, some think they may be more common than originally believed. Due to their secretive nature, they may be under-counted.

The northern saw whet owl is the smallest owl found in Illinois. It is only about seven inches long from tip to tail, once described as about the size of a pop can.

Short-eared Owl



The Short-eared Owl is especially equipped to hunt and survive on the prairie. It survived in that grassy landscape by hunting from a hover and building a nest on the ground, the only Illinois owl to do so. Short-eared owls were probably among the most numerous of the owl species in Illinois before settlement. Now, primarily due to habitat loss, the Short-eared Owl is on the Illinois state endangered species list; very few pairs nest in Illinois today.

As with many other predators, Short-eared Owl populations grow and decline in response to dramatic fluctuations in prey availability. Short-eared Owls often form colonial winter roosts in large grasslands. Short-eared owls are active at dusk and dawn.

Restoration of large areas of prairie habitat can help the short-eared owl. Prairie Ridge State Natural Area in Jasper County is one of the few places in Illinois to host nesting short-eared owls. There, almost 2,000 acres of grass provide space for hunting, roosting and raising young.

Snowy Owl



This snowy owl created quite a stir when it appeared in Chicago at Montrose Point in the fall of 2000. It perched in full view of park visitors above a public walkway giving many people their first glimpse of a snowy owl. Each winter, Illinois birders scout the Lake Michigan shoreline to search for Harry Potter's favorite owl, the Snowy Owl. These birds also use agricultural fields in winter, where they are camouflaged against the flat, open, snow-covered landscape. One of the world's largest and North America's heaviest owl, the Snowy visits Illinois annually in winter, typically remaining in the northern half of the state. Most birds seen are the darker females or an immature. During what are known as "irruptive" years, the Snowy has been found as far south as Carlyle Lake and Union County Conservation Area. Irruption means, "to increase irregularly." Don't confuse it with eruption, which is what volcanoes do. Irruptions often occur in regular cycles, for

instanced, when lemming and vole populations in the Snowy Owl's arctic home crash, forcing the owls to move south to search for food. One of the more recent Snowy Owl invasions in Illinois occurred during the winter of 1996-97, when at least 73 individuals were sighted.

Snowy owls are one of the few "diurnal" owl species. This means they are active and may hunt during daylight hours.

