

Fisherville's Short-eared Owls Favourite Birding Hotspots by John Miles



The area south of the Niagara Escarpment to Lake Erie from Hamilton to Port Dover and east to the Niagara River supports a regular concentration of wintering raptors, including Short-eared Owls. The western limit of this concentration appears to be where the Norfolk sand plain meets the Haldimand clay.

On the sand plain, there is intensive agriculture of crops such as tobacco, corn, soybeans and tomatoes, with very few idle grassy fields. However, in most springs, the clay plain is difficult to work for planting as it is too wet, and some years it is not workable until July when it is too late to plant! Crop production of corn is very poor with average yields in the 80 bushels per acre range. Normal corn production in the province is 100 bushels per acre or more. The best crops are hay or other forage crops such as Red Clover.

Consequently, many fields are idle or used for pasture. Year after year, many others are used as hay fields only. The lack of plowing results in undisturbed fields and the meadow voles multiply, providing a ready food supply for raptors. During dry springs, which we have had the past three years, the farmers have plowed more fields than they have for several years. This has reduced the number of idle fields in the Haldimand area for raptors, but things will change if the springs are wet.

At night, owls replace the hawks that hunt over the fields during the day. At dusk you will see Great Horned Owls sitting in the tree or on the telephone post where a Red-tailed or Rough-legged Hawk was during the day. Likewise, the Eastern Screech-Owl replaces the American Kestrel. The proportion of hawks to the number of replacement owls seems

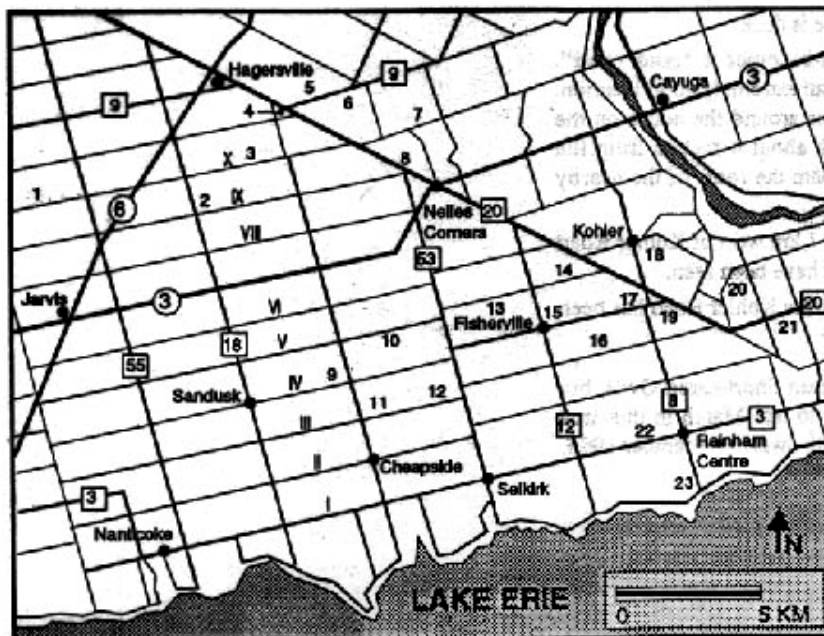
very similar. This is noticeable on the Christmas bird counts when observers spend some time owl-
Where you find a concentration of Northern Harriers in the winter daytime, you will usually find them replaced by a concentration of Short-eared Owls in the evening.

Short-eared Owls disperse from their communal roosts about 10 to 20 minutes after sundown in the winter, but if there is little or no snowcover, they may not fly at this time. In periods of heavy snow cover, the owls will sometimes fly during the day and it is possible to find 30 to 40 birds over a good field at 1:00 or 2:00 p.m., especially on overcast days.

The first major Short-eared Owl roost I ever found was in Hamilton in December 1960. Looking out over the fields from the corner of Ottawa and Limeridge Road towards the northeast was what appeared to be a large number of moths flying over the fields in the mid-afternoon. These birds were roosting in an old apple orchard. The orchard was full of owls, in the trees and on the ground. The Christmas Bird Count held a week later recorded 61 Short-eared Owls at this location, which was an Ontario CBC high count for 30 years.

I moved to Cayuga in January 1989 and since then have observed Short-eared Owls in the Haldimand area in many locations. Some spots are used by wintering Short-eared Owls year after year. Other spots seem to be used for only one year. The birds are in some spots one year and not the next, but they return the year after. Also, more locations are found every year as it is impossible to be at every field during the 10 to 20 minute window when the birds disperse.

The numbers on the Fisherville area map are Short-eared Owl locations that I have found.



Drawing and Map by Michael King

1.* The south side of the Hagersville Army Camp on the 10th Concession in some years has a good number of roosting Short-eareds with over 20 birds found on the Woodhouse CBC. I have also observed 30 to 40 Northern Harriers coming to roost in the grass. At dusk, the harriers stoop on the owls and the owls stoop on the harriers.

2.* On the east side of Sandusk Road between the 9th and 10th Concession is a pine plantation of relatively small trees where 20 to 30 birds often winter.

3. On the 10th Concession between Sandusk Road and Cheapside Road are several fields where Short-eareds are often found in the evening.

4. The old stand-by for several years has been the auto wreckers yard east of Hagersville. The birds roost in the wrecked autos and disperse over the fields to the south and west.

5.* Just east of Regional Road 20 on Regional Road 9 (turn east at the Hagersville Auto Wreckers) is a large field on the north side. This field often has 10 to 20 Short-eareds at dusk and 10 to 15 Northern Harriers.

6. At the corner of McKenzie Road and Regional Road 9, the birds appear at dusk, coming from the hayfields to the south.

7. Short-eared Owls sometimes fly north over the town line at dusk at this spot.

8. In the evening, Short-eareds often cross Regional Road 20 in front of the Cayuga Speedway.

9. The 4th Concession, especially just west of Cheapside Road, often will produce 10 to 15 birds.

10. Between Cheapside Road and Selkirk Road on the 5th Concession are large grassy fields on the south side of the road, opposite the large woodlot where it comes out to the road. These fields often have Short-eareds in the evening.

11. Just east of Cheapside Road on the 3rd Concession watch for Short-eareds over the fields at dusk especially on the north side of the road.

12. Less than 1 km west of Selkirk Road on the 3rd Concession watch for Short-eareds at dusk, especially on the north side of the road.

13.* One road north of Fisherville often has Short-eared Owls and has produced up to 30 birds on Christmas counts.

14. I have seen Short-eareds at this location.

15. Between 10 and 15 Short-eared Owls have been seen in the fields just south and just north of Fisherville on several occasions at dusk.

16.* One road south of Fisherville, at 1.9 km is a plantation of small spruce. Usually 20 to 30 Short-eareds have roosted on the ground for many years.

17. The corner of Kohler Road and Regional Road 20 often has Short-eareds sitting on the fence posts at dusk.

18. The back end of the Cayuga Drag Strip often has 10 to 20 Short-eared Owls.

19. Southeast of Kohler Road on Regional Road 20, before it does a 135° turn to the east, are several large grassy fields on the south side. Short-eareds often cross the highway between these fields and the brushy field to the north.

20.* Wilson Road south of Meadows Road becomes a "mud road", impassable when wet, icy or snowy. This has been one of the better spots with up to 45 owls at one time. At times of heavy snow cover, I have seen up to 30 birds between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m. when it has been overcast, but the birds also have been out in full sunlight. However, the best time is dusk.

21.* Suter Road south of Regional Road 20 also becomes a "mud road", impassable when wet, icy or snowy. This has been an extremely good location. One winter about 30 birds roosted in the small pines around the house on the southwest corner and you could drive up and park about 4 metres from the roosting birds. When disturbed, they would fly up onto the roofs of the nearby houses or sit on top of the fences.

22. On the north side of Regional Road 3, less than 1 km west of Kohler Road are several grassy fields where 10 to 15 Short-eareds have been seen.

23. Just north of the cottages along Lakeshore Road, the Kohler Road has been good for about 10 to 15 owls.

The above are some of the locations where I have seen Short-eared Owls, but any grassy field in the evening from late November to late March in this area could have Short-eared Owls. A star * marks spots with owls in December 1995. Good owling!

Owls (and all other birds) should not be harassed. These birds can be seen well from public roads so there is no need to trespass on private land.

Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch Open House Friday April 5 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Beamer Memorial Conservation Area, Ridge Road, Grimsby
Migrating hawks, ID sessions, nature displays and the OFO display Rain Date April 6

Notes from the OBRC by Bob Curry

As the year closes, the Committee has examined about 150 records some of which are still in circulation. Nevertheless, secretary Rob Dobos informs me that several prominent rarities, seen by multiple observers, have not been documented with reports to the Committee. To cite one example, if you were among the 100 or so (my estimate) who observed the Black-throated Gray Warbler near Arkell this past April, please submit a report. Of course, we are anxious to receive documentation on occurrences of lesser rarities from the Review List.

It is important to Ontario's avifaunal history to keep on file documentation of rarity sightings. Henri Ouellet who is a member of the AOU Check-list Committee informs us that state and provincial annual reports substantiated by documentation on file are used to describe the ranges of species in the forthcoming Seventh Edition of the Check-list.

As most readers are aware, the AOU will grant species status to several birds that have been regarded as subspecies group (see *OFO NEWS* 13: 2). Those of most interest to us are Bullock's Oriole and Spotted Towhee. Again, the OBRC invites old reports of these species. Some that come to mind are the April 4, 1980 Bullock's Oriole in Willowdale, the other that wintered in Port Dover in 1980-81, and the Spotted Towhee at the late Harold Axtell's feeder in Fort Erie in December 1976.

In March, there will be some changes to the Committee. The following three members have reached the end of their three-year term: Ross James who has served a total of 8 years since the Committee's inception; Dennis Rupert (9 years); and Bob Curry (12 years). Their hard work is gratefully acknowledged. The three replacement members are: David Brewer of Puslinch, Peter Burke of Lakefield and Nick Escott of Thunder Bay.

The next meeting of the Committee to complete decisions affecting the 1995 Annual Report will be on Saturday March 2, 1996.

Send your rare bird reports to: Rob Dobos,
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