

Asio flammeus (Short-eared Owl)

Family: Strigidae (Typical Owls)

Order: Strigiformes (Owls)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Short-eared Owl, *Asio flammeus*.

[<http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/short-eared-owl>, downloaded 5 March 2017]

TRAITS. *Asio flammeus* are medium-sized owls with a length of 38cm, and weight of 340g (Wiggins et al, 2006). They have round, large bordered facial disks (Fig. 1) which are beige coloured. They possess small ear tufts on the upper part of their heads. The sexes can be distinguished with the male's underside being white and the female's having a tawny appearance with close vertical brown streaks. The back of the owl is brown and streaked with white. The tail, as well as the wings have black bars, with the wings also having black tips with a broad span of 97cm. The females are slightly larger than the males, while also having heavier streaks and browner upperparts. The eyes of the short-eared owl are a vibrant yellow with black outlines (Vitali and Muir, 2017). The bill is short, curved, and black. The hardly-visible ear tufts and the yellow eyes differentiate the short-eared owl from the striped owl *Pseudoscops (Asio) clamator* which resides in Tobago (TTBSDC, 2001).

DISTRIBUTION. Widely distributed around the world (Fig. 2), with ten acknowledged subspecies (Wiggins et al, 2006), it is found in North America, South America and Eurasia, and islands in the Caribbean, Iceland, the Galapagos Islands, and Hawaii (IUCN, 2017). This is notably all continents except Antarctica and Australia. It is partially migratory, known to move to warmer southern areas from colder northern regions in winter months, or to areas of higher rodent, particularly voles, population. In Trinidad, it is recognised as a vagrant species and was first sighted at Wallerfield in 1998. Documentation of the owl has so far only occurred in 2001 and 2010 (Figs 3 and 4).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. It lives in diverse habitats which would include open country dunes, marshes, tundra, savannas, at sea level or in high elevated areas such as the Andes. Although it is fond of open areas it needs adequate vegetation for nesting (Vitali and Muir, 2017). Farmland and savannas however are where they typically go to breed. It is mostly active during the day (diurnal), specifically the evening times (crepuscular), however it can also be seen at night (Kaufman, 2001).

FOOD AND FEEDING. Evening, as well as, morning time is when they usually hunt. They feed mostly on rodents such as voles, mice and rats, but will also eat other small animals such as bats. Nesting owls would hunt only near their nests and usually have a marked hunting territory (Clark, 1975). They will also eat birds in coastal areas (Kaufman, 2001). The prey does not usually struggle while the short-eared owl is in the air, but if it does occur, it will attack the prey's neck until the prey dies. The prey is mostly eaten head first, then the front limbs. The visceral organs are eaten with the exception of the intestines. The caecum is especially disdained and avoided. The prey is either torn apart using its talons or more often the short-ear owl uses the surface of a perch to dismember the animal (Clark, 1975).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. These owls are generally monogamous, however there are cases where nearby nests were parented by one male (Clark, 1975). They practice communal roosting when prey is abundant (Watson, 1998). In the wild the recorded life span is 13 years.

REPRODUCTION. The female usually lays 6-8 eggs which are originally white but become stained within the nest. The nests are made by the females, sometimes in low brush but more often on the ground (Watson, 1998). She exclusively sits on the eggs for approximately one month. The males will hunt and bring food for her, as well as when the eggs have hatched. The male will give the prey to the female who will distribute it to the young (Holt, 1992). At approximately two weeks old the young learn to explore beyond their nest, and they learn to fly approximately one month after they are born (Kaufman, 2001). The young are blind for five days after their birth (Clark, 1975). The males will also show aggressive tendencies if intruders are near the nest.

BEHAVIOUR.

They fly close to the ground and search by sight or sound for their prey (Kaufman, 2001). They are both highly protective of their young, and during night the male tends to be even more aggressive. They hang above the trespasser while making a sharp 'bark' or wing clap; on the ground it will attempt to make itself larger by ruffling its feathers, and spreading its wings wide while tilting forward. For courtship, the male often uses rhythmic wing claps while flying high to attract the females. The short-eared owls have limited cries. The young owls before hatching will make single high squeaks while still inside the egg. They young will develop a high hissing sound

to relay threat and when begging for food, as well as a high pitch chitter used to signal discomfort. The adults have a *keee-ow* type cry to signal threat, or as a courtship cry by females, with the male courtship cry being recognized as *voo-hoo-hoo* (Clark, 1975).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. This species is listed under Least Concern according to the Red List Category and Criteria. This is primary due to its significant wide range. This is despite the reducing population which is not seen to be drastic enough to be an immediate concern. The global population is approximated to be 3 million individuals. The reasoning for their current decline is primarily due to habitat loss by intensified agriculture as well as urbanisation. Natural predators would include larger birds or ground nest predators (Watson, 1998). Other factors which play a role would be rodent poisoning, domestic animal attacks, as well as, the eggs being preyed upon (IUCN, 2017).

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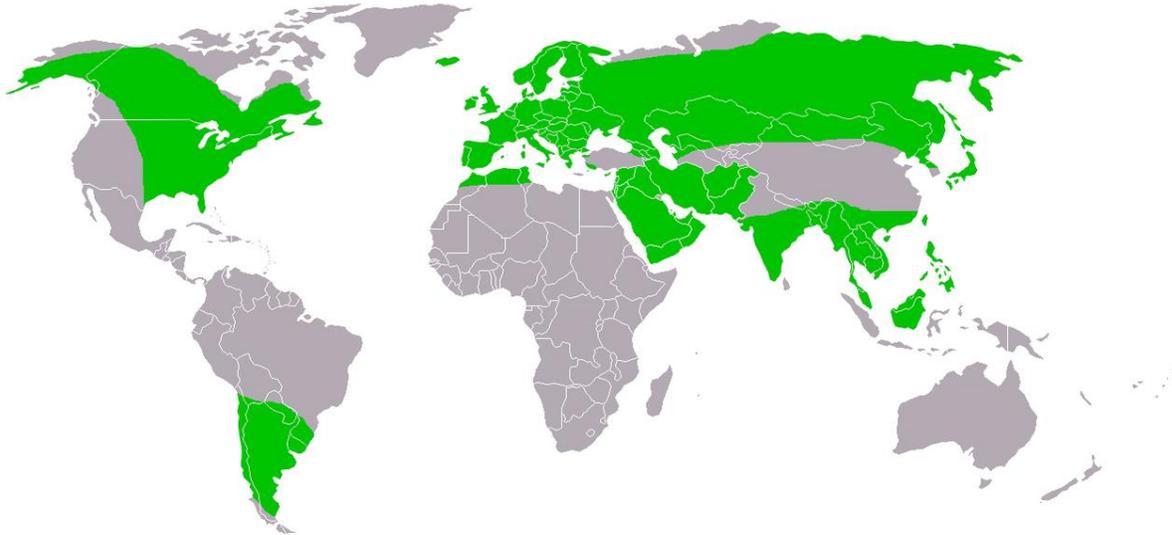


Fig. 2. Worldwide distribution of *Asio flammeus*.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short-eared_owl, downloaded 7 March 2017]



Fig. 3. Adult *Asio flammeus* in Warren, Trinidad, 13 September 2001. The second sighted in Trinidad, first documentation.

[<http://tbsdc.tffc.org/SECB/records/ttshort-earedowl.html>, downloaded 7 March 2017]

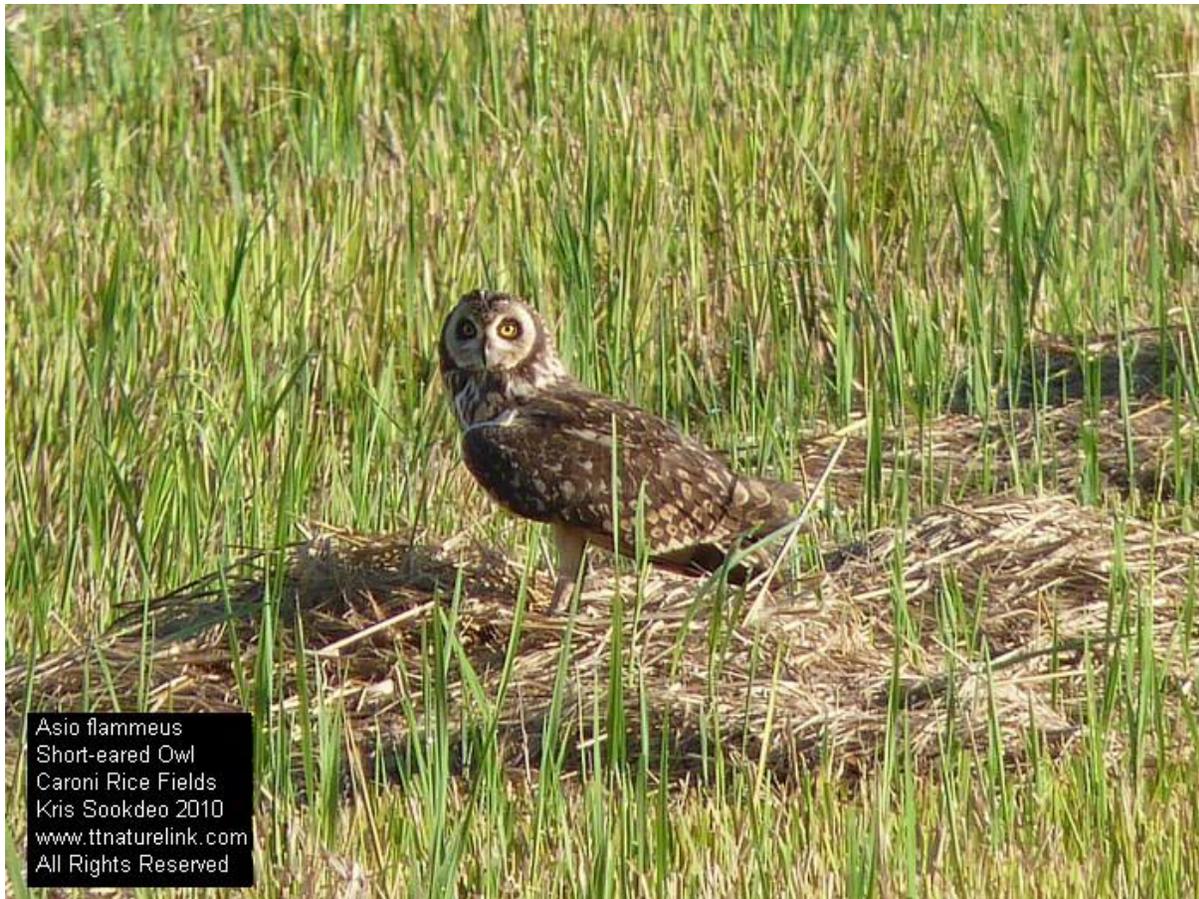


Fig. 4. The second documented photograph of *Asio flammeus* in Trinidad, seen in the Caroni rice fields, 2010.

[<http://www.gallery.ttnaturelink.com/Birds/Rare-or-unusual-bird-species/BL-Short-eared-Owl-Birds-of-Trinidad-and-Tobago>, downloaded 7 March 2017]

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