

# Owls in the UK - the Short-eared Owl

You need three ingredients to spot a 'Shortie' - a sliver of inside knowledge, a dollop of patience, and, above all else, a big chunk of luck. But if you know where to look, there are plenty of places in the UK – including one not far from Buriton – where they can be found, especially as they usually hunt during the day.

## What does a short-eared owl look like?

Birders sometimes say they look a little like a barn owl but bigger. They have bright yellow eyes with large black patches around them, giving a slightly startled look, a rounded head with tiny hard-to-see feather tufts like short ears, and mottled brown and buff plumage. Shorties are usually 34–42cm long with a wingspan of around a metre.

## When and where are you most likely to see them?

They hunt mostly during the day, making them easier to spot than other owls. In the UK they mainly inhabit open, treeless spaces – moorlands, rough grasslands, bogs, coastal salt marshes, dunes and reclaimed land – flying low and slow in a buoyant, moth-like way with floppy, irregular wingbeats. They can also be seen perched on posts, stakes or low mounds, scanning for prey.

The UK's native population is boosted in winter by migrants from Scandinavia, Russia and Iceland. Local birders have reported winter sightings at Farlington Marshes, near Portsmouth.

## What do they hunt?

Mostly small mammals – field voles, mice and shrews – but occasionally ground birds.

## Where do they nest?

Shorties usually nest on the ground in a rough, shallow scrape. On the nest, adults expand their ear tufts to look like horns, putting on a display that may deter predators.

## How long do they live?

Typically around four years in the wild; ringing records suggest some have lived to 12. In captivity, up to 15. RSPB records show a long-term population decline of around 50% in recent decades.

## Why are they under pressure?

Habitat loss from intensive farming, development and forestry; ground nests easily crushed by livestock or machinery; and low rodent years can cause local breeding failures.

# Owls continued...

## What can we do to help?

Protect open land like rough grasslands, coastal marshes and moorlands; avoid chemical rat and mouse poisons, which build up in owls' bodies; take care with dogs on open moor and field areas during breeding season; put bright markers on wire fences; and support groups like the RSPB that tackle illegal killing of birds of prey.

## And finally...

Instead of a hoot, a short-eared owl will often emit rough barks or yelps, sounding almost like a dog when upset or defending territory – and during courtship they've been heard snapping their wings together mid-air.

