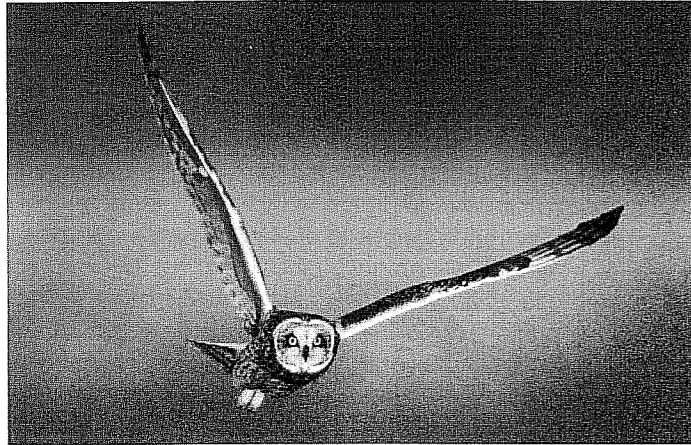


Short-Eared Owls at Their Winter Roost in St. Clair County

by Tom May

Photos by Sandra Samojeden



Peabody River King State Fish and Wildlife Area is approximately 2000 acres located about one mile east of New Athens, Illinois and bordering the Kaskaskia River. It was donated by Peabody Coal Company in 1994 to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. It was a surface mine and a portion was mined in the 1950's before there was any land restoration required by law. The portion that was mined later, up to the 1980's, was reclaimed and is mostly in fescue. Recently, some of the grasslands have been planted with native prairie grasses to provide better habitat for wildlife.

A resident Canada goose population nests on the lake shores and islands. Large numbers of migrating ducks and geese visit this area each fall with over 4,000 snow geese wintering here during the season. Several areas have been set aside as roosting areas for short-eared owls.

The first short-eared owls of the 2006-07 season arrived at Peabody River King FWA on October 17th, when two birds showed up near the roosting area. Owls were visible sporadically until November 8th and then were visible every day until they left on March 29th. Their numbers increased to eight on December 8th and never dropped below that the rest of the season.

I observed short-eared owls every possible evening throughout the winter from the roads bordering the roost area. The numbers that were seen at dusk were consistently in the eight to twelve range all winter long. Sometimes they would rise as a group and sometimes they would be sitting in trees before I arrived. The owl's habits were not consistent with regard to changing weather patterns or

changes in available daylight.

On February 19th, because I had a previous commitment, I asked Mary and Dennis Regan to go to Peabody and count the owls and make a report on the Great Backyard Bird Count. They reported that twenty owls jumped up when an animal ran through the roost field. This was the first report of a larger number and was far greater than what had been previously observed. During the next few days smaller numbers were observed from the roads and on February 28th, as I walked along the road, thirty-five owls exploded out of the roost field. For the next several evenings the counts were from twenty-one to thirty-eight on March 3rd and March 7th. The number dropped to sixteen on March 9th after a controlled burn was done on most of the area across the main road from the roost field. After a second controlled burn the number went down to three owls, but rebounded



"How many short-eared owls can you find in this photo?"

(There are nine)

the next night to thirty-four. After that the numbers dwindled down to a final four on March 29th for the last recorded evening with owls.

Paul Clyne, Steve Bailey, and Gene Jacobs have provided some explanations for the variation in numbers. Paul Clyne, in an email on IBET wrote, "Tom May's tally of thirty-five is significant for the season, although the number is presumably assignable to wintering populations." Steve Bailey, in a personal email wrote, "I would say that those birds have probably been around all winter." Gene Jacobs, a raptor specialist from Wisconsin, in a personal email suggested, "If your observation protocol has stayed the same, then the owls in large numbers have not been there all winter, and just arrived the last six weeks of their winter season."

John Bowman, the IDNR Ranger at Peabody, told me, that "A very large number of short-eared owls got up out of that same field while a dog trial was going on near by." I also found out at a later date that a St. Louis birder walked through the field taking a short cut back to his car and, "scared up thirty-five short-eared owls." That date was February 9th. This information lends credence to Paul Clyne's and Steve Bailey's scenario of it being a wintering population.

The second scenario, suggested by Gene Jacobs, is also a possibility because at the time of the first observed larger numbers, it was extremely cold with a strong north wind for several days, and birds from another area could have hunkered down at Peabody to wait out the weather. Short-eared owls are known to be nomadic and there are two other reclaimed surface mine areas in a close proximity to Peabody.

The World Shooting Complex is about fourteen miles away and Pyramid State Park is about thirty miles away. Both of these are known to have short-eared owls during the winter roosting season.

I learned, watching short-eared owls this past winter, that small disturbances like a coyote or deer passing through their roost field does not seem to bother them. They always returned to the same roost area after a disturbance. Based on that information, I wrote a Wildlife Preservation Grant proposal to IDNR to do a census of the owls and also Northern harriers that use Peabody as a wintering roost area. I proposed that a group of people would walk through the known roost fields, at the approximate time the owls would normally be rising to hunt, and accomplish an accurate count. This small disturbance would occur only once every three weeks throughout the winter season so as not to permanently dislodge the owls. One person would count the Northern harriers by watching the known roosting sites from the road as they go to roost in the evening. IDNR has agreed to fund this proposal for this coming winter season.

It is my hope that a census of these two species on their wintering grounds will add to the knowledge of using reclaimed strip mine land in southern Illinois as an important habitat for birds.



Tom May is a retired educator on the Board of Illinois Audubon Society, representing the Kaskaskia Valley Chapter.