

Short-eared Owls

The first time I saw a Short-eared owl I had no idea what I was looking at. Peter and I were on a camping holiday in Scotland and were newly-fledged birdwatchers – we had recently purchased the Observers Book of Birds and using this had been able to distinguish Buzzards (common and sitting on telegraph poles) from Golden Eagles (huge, only seen once in the far distance). But what was this bird of prey flying like a big pale brown moth over the moorlands?? It wasn't a Buzzard – we were quite good at identifying them now – and we just couldn't find another bird of prey which fitted the bill. It was a while before the penny dropped – it wasn't a bird of prey, it was an owl! An owl with beautiful long patterned wings drifting over the moors during the day. It was a Short-eared Owl.



The Short-eared Owl regularly hunts during the day (it also hunts at night), and this makes it one of our more visible owls. There are parts of eastern England where, in winter, it is very easy to see a Short-eared Owl hunting over marshes and fields – this is because numbers in the UK are swollen by birds which arrive from Scandinavia, avoiding the harsh winters there. In Scotland in the summer they breed on the moors and again can be seen quite easily. But what about in Wales? Well Short-eared Owls are very much birds of open rough grassland and heath, nesting on the ground usually under the shelter of heather, bracken or tall grasses. They will also breed in young forestry plantations. Areas with high populations of small mammal prey and a lack of disturbance, including disturbance from ground predators are key to their success. Given these requirements, it is perhaps not really surprising that Short-eared Owls are a scarce breeding bird in Pembrokeshire. Such "optimal" breeding habitat occurs mainly on the offshore islands and for a number of years Skomer has been home to one or two breeding pairs. Once, in 1993, 12 pairs nested there – it must have been a peak year for Skomer Voles!

On one overnight visit to Skomer I was lucky enough to see the courtship display in the evening – the male flies around in circles, going ever higher, then stoops and loops whilst calling his loud hoo-hoo-hoo call and wing clapping. All quite spectacular and quite unexpected from an owl!

Short-eared Owls nest on the ground and keep a low profile when breeding. Many a Skomer visitor has been quite unaware that they are sharing the island with such a charismatic bird. And they are indeed charismatic. They have wonderful staring yellow eyes and beautifully marked plumage. It is one of those birds which makes your day better when you see it. And it is possible to see a Short-eared Owl around here. They are sometimes seen at Marloes Mere, and over the grassy areas on the south of the peninsula. We have seen one just once from our garden, hunting over the marshes below. Further afield they can be sighted at Dowrog Common, Castlemartin Corse and St David's airfield.



Rosemary Royle