

## Owls of Keuka Lake – Dave deCalesta

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Rarely seen but often heard, the owls of the forested hillsides surrounding Keuka Lake are an important component of the bird community. They perform a real service by controlling rodent populations. Excepting two rare winter visitors (Great Grey and Snowy) all are year-round residents. They have exceptional hearing and vision, and their wing feathers are softened at the edges, so they can swoop undetected on prey.



The biggest of the resident owls at 24+ inches tall, the great horned owl frequents small woodlots and nests in abandoned crow or hawk nests. Primary prey is small rodents, but these big owls can capture and kill skunks, opossums, grouse and house cats. Call is a deep, booming *hoo, hoo-oo, hoo, hoo* at dawn and dusk. Called “Cat Owl” because of its ears.



About 2/3 the size of the great horned owl, the long-eared owl is one of three “eared” owls. This owl prefers extensive conifer patches (hemlocks, red and white pine). It nests in old crow and hawk nests and tree cavities. It eats mice, an occasional rabbit, frogs and snakes. Call is a low, moaning *hoooo*.



Smallest of the eared owls at 8-9 inches, screech owls prefer oak and hardwood forests along streams. They nest in small cavities in medium-sized trees (~15 inches diameter) but use other cavities such as wood duck nest boxes. They eat mice, insects, moths, spiders, snakes and salamanders. Their call is a ghost-like mournful, tremulous, whinnying call.



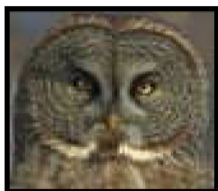
Called the “monkey-faced” owl, the 16 inch barn owl prefers open meadows and farmlands more than the other owls. It nests in hollow trees, barns and church steeples, generally using the same nest site every year. Like other owls, it feeds on mice and small rodents, but also includes small birds, large bugs, snakes, frogs, and crayfish in its diet. Call is a rasping hiss: *kschh*.



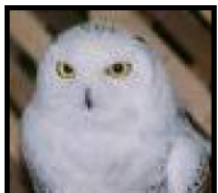
The barred owl is medium-sized, standing ~ 20 inches tall. Mostly found in dense forest along lakes, streams, and swamps. It nests in tree cavities and old hawk and owl nests, and feeds on medium-sized mammals (squirrels, chipmunks), small birds, snakes and crayfish. Its call is a distinctive, repeated “*who cooks for you-aah*” and it is often heard during the day.



The northern saw-whet is the smallest of owls (7 inches tall) and also the tamest, allowing people to walk right up to it. Like the barred owl, saw-whets prefer dense forestlands along cedar swamps, streams, and bogs. They nest in natural cavities in trees and eat mice, insects, frogs and snakes. Their call is a mellow whistled note: *too, too, too, too, too*.



The great gray is the biggest owl (~30 inches tall), but is a rare winter visitor. A year-long resident of Canada’s boreal forests of spruce-fir and bogs, it occasionally ventures south as far as Pennsylvania during winter where it is eagerly viewed by birders as an extremely rare bird. The bird is quite tame and will sit for hours in a tree while hundreds of birders snap its picture. Call is a deep, booming *whoo-hoo-hoo*.



Another rare winter visitor is the 25-inch snowy owl. Normally a bird of the Arctic, it ventures south into northern USA during winter when population density of its dietary staple, the squirrel-sized lemming, crashes and it must seek food elsewhere. This owl is usually silent, except for a repeated *krow-ow* during the breeding season.