

# ATLASSING TIPS



## OWLS

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### FINDING OWLS

Owls are different in a couple of ways from other birds in terms of the atlassing strategies needed to detect them. The obvious one is that they are nocturnal, so you won't usually find too many in your daytime visits to atlas squares. The other is that many of them are early breeders, so going out in June to search for them will result in relatively few detections. So here are a few points to take into consideration to maximize the owl list for your atlas squares.

### WHEN AND HOW TO FIND OWLS

Do an owling blitz in late February and March (in southern BC) or March and April (in central and northern BC). Go out shortly after dark and try to cover as many atlas squares as you can (but don't stay up too late—we don't want you falling asleep at the wheel!). Stop every kilometre or so in good habitat until you've detected all the species you expect to find in each square. Play recordings if you have them.

**Barn Owl:** best to go out at night with a powerful searchlight and scan over farm fields or wet meadows to look for foraging birds. Stop in good habitat and make a squeaking noise with your lips and hand; this often brings Barn Owls in very quickly! Check local barns for roosting and nesting birds (with the owner's permission of course!).

**Flammulated Owl:** These birds are migratory and don't get back into BC until May. Drive through Interior Douglas-fir forests at night in the last half of May or the first week of June and listen for their soft hoots. If you hear one calling, try to come back to that spot in June and hike around during the day, scratching on trees with flicker holes—hopefully the female will stick her head out and you'll have a confirmed nest!

**Western Screech-Owl:** Search for these in all low elevation forests along the coast and riparian woodlands in the southern Interior. Playback is very useful to find these birds—they aren't as vocal as some of the other small owls. If you do find any screech-owls, please make a note of exactly where you are—this is one species that we are very interested in exact numbers and locations throughout the province. Screech-owl nests are more difficult to find; they don't normally look out of their holes when you scratch on a snag, so you have to put a bit more effort into it. Also—screech-owls often use tree cavities as roost sites, so even seeing one looking out of a hole isn't a sure sign of breeding. Hearing fledglings is perhaps the best way to confirm breeding—they give whimpering begging calls (a descending three-note call) in June and early July.

**Great Horned Owl:** Listen for Great Horned Owls at dusk and dawn in January and February—the territorial pairs are very vocal at that time. Playback isn't as effective for this species, but usually you won't need it. Look for a big round head on any big stick nest in your neighbourhood; they start to nest in February so are relatively easy to see before the leaves come out in April.

**Northern Pygmy-Owl:** This is a daytime species, so no need to go out at night for them. They call a lot in April at dusk and dawn, but their nests are hard to find. Like screech-owls, they tend not to peek out of their nest-holes.

**Barred Owl:** Use playback (or learn to imitate their calls); these are relatively common over most of the province. They nest in large, old trees, often ones with broken tops.

**Great Gray Owl:** Watch for these birds foraging at dusk and dawn around forest openings and edges. They nest in old hawk nests or on broken-topped trees.

**Long-eared Owl:** Search groves of trees near grasslands, meadows, or forest openings—look for stick nests such as those made by crows, magpies, or hawks. If you get out before the leaves come out in April, you should be able to see their long “ears” poking up from the nest.

**Short-eared Owl:** These birds nest on the ground in thick grass or shrubs; they are best located at dusk and dawn as they forage over meadows and pastures.

**Boreal Owl:** Males are very vocal in March and April and even into May in northern BC. Playback is useful, since paired males don’t call very much at all, but will come in and squawk at you if you’re playing a recording of their song. Beware of winnowing snipes—they make a sound very similar to the song of the Boreal Owl! Like saw-whets, female Boreals almost always look out of their nest-holes when you knock—and they never use holes for roosts so breeding is relatively easy to confirm.

**Northern Saw-whet Owl:** Males are very vocal in late February and March, into April in central and northern BC. Once you’ve found the male, scratch on all the snags you can find that have flicker holes in them and you’ll be surprised how easy it is to find a nest (presuming he’s attracted a mate!). You can check for nests anytime from late March through early May.