

NR6/125.13/1999/Winter
c.1

1999 WINTER COMPENDIUM OF WILDLIFE APPRECIATION



Colorado's Wildlife Company



flammulated owl

The Little Owls

burrowing owl

western screech-owl

eastern screech-owl

northern saw-whet owl

northern pygmy-owl

COLORADO STATE PUBLICATIONS LIBRARY
NR6/125.13/1999/winter local
The little owls



3 1799 00027 6121

Owls In Small Packages

by Mary Taylor Young

A hooting call sounds through the darkness. A small, silent shape slips past on broad, soft wings. A pair of round yellow eyes stares from a tree limb. An owl is abroad tonight.

The large, ear-tufted shape of a great horned owl is our most common image of an owl. But a host of much smaller owls inhabits our state. We rarely see them, though several are quite common. They live their lives hidden from our view, hunting by night in Colorado's forests and open country. They are the Little Owls, fierce predators no bigger than robins.

The flammulated, northern pygmy, eastern screech, western screech, northern saw-whet and burrowing owls all stand, on average, no taller than nine inches. By comparison, a robin is 10 inches long and an American crow is 18 inches. The smallest of this crew, the flammulated owl, is the size of a sparrow, though there's little chance you would confuse the two. An owl's plump body shape and large, blocky head give it a distinctive profile.

EVERY INCH AN OWL

With their huge eyes and diminutive size, the little owls are cute and appealing. But an owl is still an owl, even if it's pocket-sized. These sharp-beaked, fierce-taloned birds of prey are designed for hunting and killing. Some of them prey upon birds much bigger than themselves. The little owls belong to the Typical Owl family, which includes all owls in Colorado except the barn owl, and they share the family's characteristics. Both vision and hearing are very important to these hunters. Their eyes are extremely large. The eight-inch high screech-owl has eyes about the size of a human child's. The binocular vision afforded by forward-facing eyes gives them excellent depth perception and judgment of distance, important skills for visual hunters. Owls also have exceptional hearing and can hunt in complete darkness using only sound.

The little owls have wingspans averaging 19 inches, more than twice their length. Silent flight is crucial for a night hunter and these long, wide wings allow the little owls to fly and glide quietly. Their



feathers are soft, with a saw-tooth edge that breaks up air passing over the wing, eliminating any sound from wind resistance.

Like other raptors, owls cough up neatly-packaged pellets of indigestible bone, hair and feathers after a meal. Pellets on the ground beneath a tree are good indicators of a favorite perch. Because owls tend to gulp their prey whole rather than tearing it into pieces as hawks do, pellets often contain whole skulls, bones and insect exoskeletons, good evidence of the owls' diet.

HOOO ARE THE LITTLE OWLS?

Flame colored. That's what flammulated means. The secretive **flammulated owl** is a tiny forest sprite rarely seen but sometimes heard. The flame name derives from rusty-red feathers around the face that seem to flare brightly against the tiny bird's dull gray plumage and the forest green of its habitat. Flams, as they are sometimes nicknamed by owlers, live in ponderosa pine forests and are largely nocturnal. They sally out from a perch in a short, scurrying flight, grabbing moths in the air with their talons, or capturing insects on tree branches. They nest in abandoned woodpecker holes. Unlike most of the other small owls, they migrate from Colorado for winter.

The **northern saw-whet owl's** over-sized head and enormous eyes give it the look of a little professor. When young leave the nest, they stay together for a week or two, learning to hunt from the parent. This is a good time to watch for them. Saw-whets are quite tame and curious around humans. They may fly in and perch nearly at arm's-length, giving viewers a good look at them. The saw-whet's call is a steady series of piping whistles, sounded about two hoots a second. Early settlers thought the saw-whet's persistent high-pitched call sounded like a saw being sharpened or whetted. They are determined predators, feeding on mice, voles and even bats.

The **northern pygmy-owl** is one of the few owls active more by day than by night, though greatest activity is from dawn through early morning, and late afternoon through dusk.

This allows the pygmy-owl to prey on birds, which are also diurnal and thus not usually hunted by owls. The pygmy-owl is known for a ferocity and strength that belie its miniscule size. It attacks prey as large or larger than itself—jays, large songbirds, ground squirrels even small grouse. The pygmy-owl is the frequent target of mobbing by songbirds and the racket can betray the owl's location. This daytime hunter lacks the soft, silent feathers of the night owls and is a fairly noisy flier, its wings making an airy whirring.

Does the northern pygmy-owl have eyes in the back of its head? A pair of black spots on the nape of the neck look much like the "eyespot" on some fish and insects. Perhaps they are a disguise that protects the owl from attack from the rear.

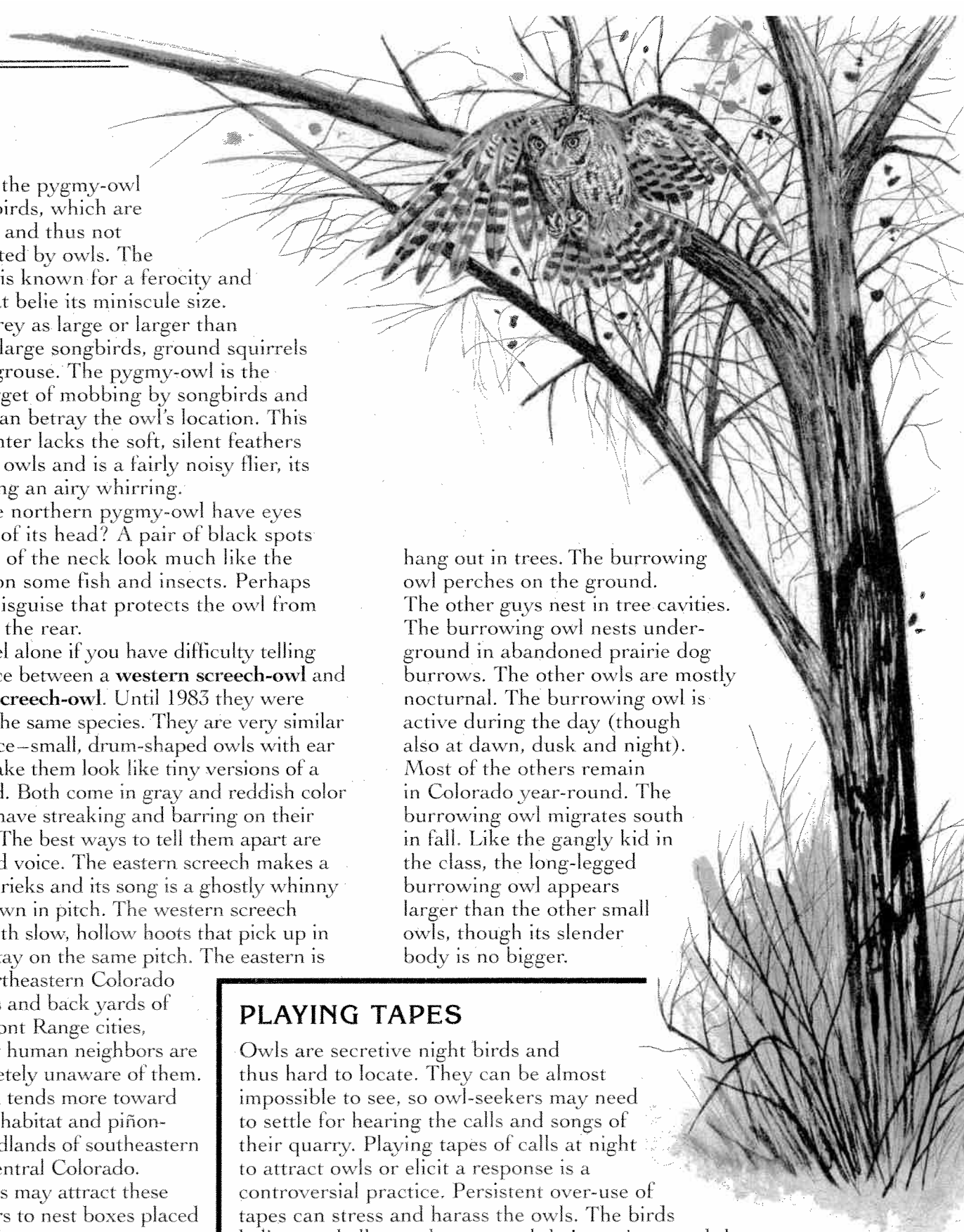
Don't feel alone if you have difficulty telling the difference between a **western screech-owl** and an **eastern screech-owl**. Until 1983 they were considered the same species. They are very similar in appearance—small, drum-shaped owls with ear tufts that make them look like tiny versions of a great horned. Both come in gray and reddish color phases and have streaking and barring on their undersides. The best ways to tell them apart are by range and voice. The eastern screech makes a variety of shrieks and its song is a ghostly whinny that goes down in pitch. The western screech starts out with slow, hollow hoots that pick up in tempo but stay on the same pitch. The eastern is found in northeastern Colorado and in parks and back yards of northern Front Range cities, though their human neighbors are often completely unaware of them. The western tends more toward the riparian habitat and piñon-juniper woodlands of southeastern and south central Colorado. City dwellers may attract these cavity nesters to nest boxes placed in back yard trees.

Among the little owls, the **burrowing owl**, marches to the tune of a different drummer. Everybody else lives in the forest. The burrowing owl inhabits open grasslands. Other owls

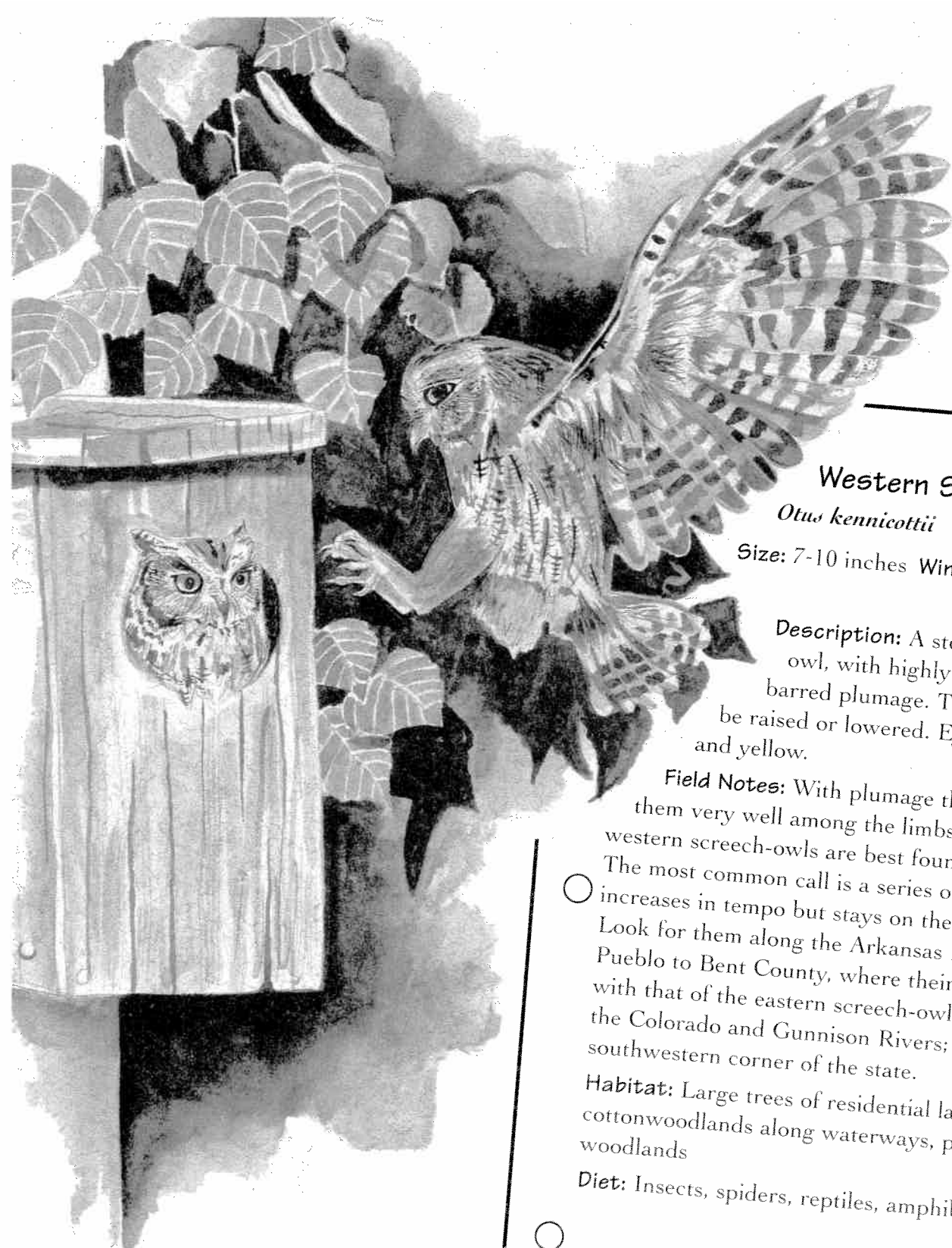
hang out in trees. The burrowing owl perches on the ground. The other guys nest in tree cavities. The burrowing owl nests underground in abandoned prairie dog burrows. The other owls are mostly nocturnal. The burrowing owl is active during the day (though also at dawn, dusk and night). Most of the others remain in Colorado year-round. The burrowing owl migrates south in fall. Like the gangly kid in the class, the long-legged burrowing owl appears larger than the other small owls, though its slender body is no bigger.

PLAYING TAPES

Owls are secretive night birds and thus hard to locate. They can be almost impossible to see, so owl-seekers may need to settle for hearing the calls and songs of their quarry. Playing tapes of calls at night to attract owls or elicit a response is a controversial practice. Persistent over-use of tapes can stress and harass the owls. The birds believe a challenger has entered their territory and they may curtail their hunting or leave their young exposed when they move to check out the sound. Perhaps a better choice is to learn to mimic a few owl calls with your own voice. If you do use tapes, play them judiciously and for short periods, just to see whooo is in the neighborhood.



Writing/Editor: Mary Taylor Young; Graphic Design: Linda Meas; Illustration: Paul Gray; Biological and Program Advisor: Bob Hembrode



Western Screech-owl

Otus kennicottii

Size: 7-10 inches Wingspan: 22 inches

Description: A stocky-bodied gray owl, with highly streaked and barred plumage. The ear tufts can be raised or lowered. Eyes are large and yellow.

Field Notes: With plumage that disguises them very well among the limbs of trees, western screech-owls are best found by sound. The most common call is a series of hoots that increases in tempo but stays on the same note. Look for them along the Arkansas River from Pueblo to Bent County, where their range merges with that of the eastern screech-owl; along the Colorado and Gunnison Rivers; and in the southwestern corner of the state.

Habitat: Large trees of residential landscaping, cottonwoodlands along waterways, piñon-juniper woodlands

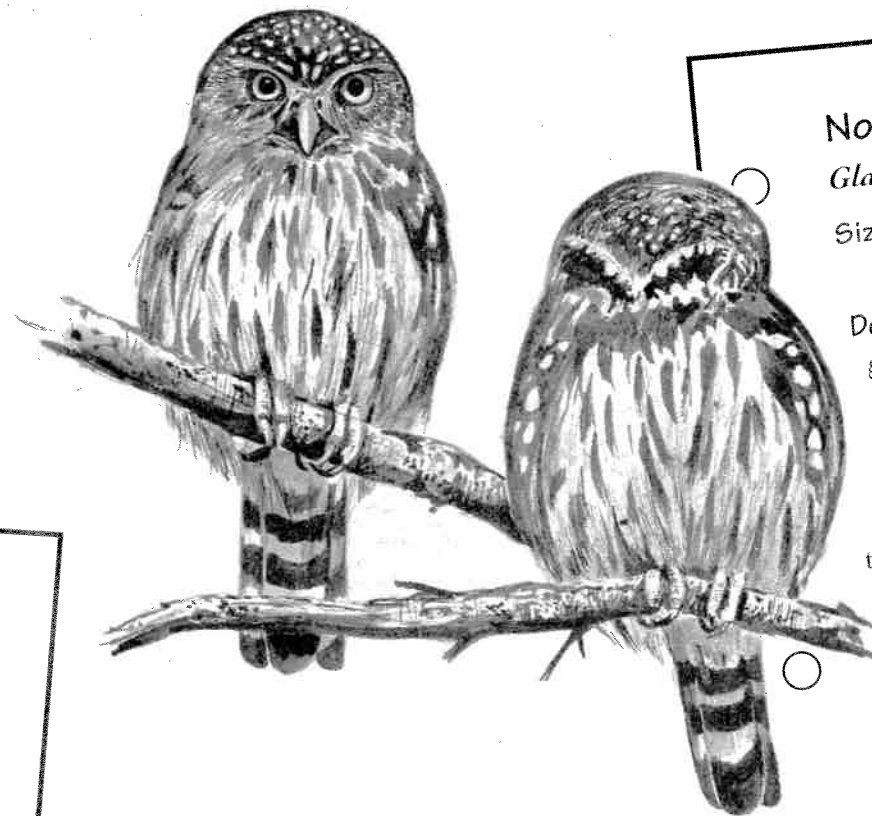
Diet: Insects, spiders, reptiles, amphibians, mice

Flammulated Owl

Otus flammeolus

Size: 6-7 inches Wingspan: 14 inches

Description: A very small, dark gray owl with the face and rusty-red lines



Northern Pygmy-owl

Glaucidium gnoma

Size: 7 inches

Wingspan: 15 inches

Description: This tiny, round-headed owl has grayish or reddish-brown plumage, pale belly and yellow eyes. The back of the head has two distinctive black eyespots. The long tail is marked with pale bars.

Field Notes: Much of the seven-inch size of this little raptor is in its long tail. It nests in old woodpecker holes. Listen for its piping hoot, sounded regularly every few seconds. Sharp observers may see the pygmy-owl hunting in late afternoon or early morning. Look for them from Front Range foothills west.

Habitat: Open ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir forests, mature piñon-juniper woodlands

Diet: Songbirds, mice, ground squirrels

Northern Saw-whet Owl

Aegolius acadicus

Size: 7-8 1/2 inches Wingspan: 17-20 inches

Description: A small owl with very large, rounded head and large feathery discs around the eyes that give it the shape of an elongated heart. The plumage is dark reddish-brown with paler, streaked breast and belly. It has yellow eyes and brown bill.

Field Notes: This small owl listens, watches and waits from a low perch for mice to reveal themselves, then pounces silently. The saw-whet's piping call sounds like a clarion through the night-time forest. In spring the males may sing for hours, responding quickly to mimicked calls. Saw-whets are found from Front Range foothills west across the state.

Habitat: Ponderosa pine forests, piñon-juniper woodlands

Diet: Mice, voles, shrews, bats, insects



Burrowing Owl

Athene cunicularia

Size: 9-11 inches Wingspan: 22 inches

Description: A small, brown, ground-dwelling owl with long yellow legs and large yellow eyes. Plumage is spotted and barred with white. White eyebrows and dark collar.

Field Notes: Prairie dog towns are the place to look for burrowing owls from April through early October. Active during daylight hours, this little ground owl is among the easiest of all owls to observe. As an uninvited inhabitant of prairie dog towns, it benefits from its hosts' vocal alarm system. The burrowing owl is a threatened species in Colorado. It is found primarily on the Eastern Plains, but also in the Grand Valley.

Habitat: Prairie dog towns

Diet: Grasshoppers and other insects, spiders, mice, snakes, amphibians

Description: A very rusty-red coloration on the face and rusty-red lines down the back that form a V. Ear tufts can be raised or lowered. The only small owl with dark eyes.

Field Notes: These little owls nest in Colorado from the central mountains west across the state. They are here from April through early October, spending winter in Mexico and Central America. Secretive and nocturnal, the flammulated owl

often perches in the upper reaches of trees near the trunk and is difficult to locate, thus may be more common than originally thought. Listen for its call, a double hoo-HOOT, with the second note louder. Mimicked hoots will bring this hidden owl closer as it moves to lower branches to investigate.

Habitat: Mature, open ponderosa pine or pine-Douglas-fir forests, open aspen forests, old-growth piñon-juniper woodlands

Diet: Insects, including moths, grasshoppers, cicadas; also spiders, scorpions, mice

Eastern Screech-owl

Otus asio

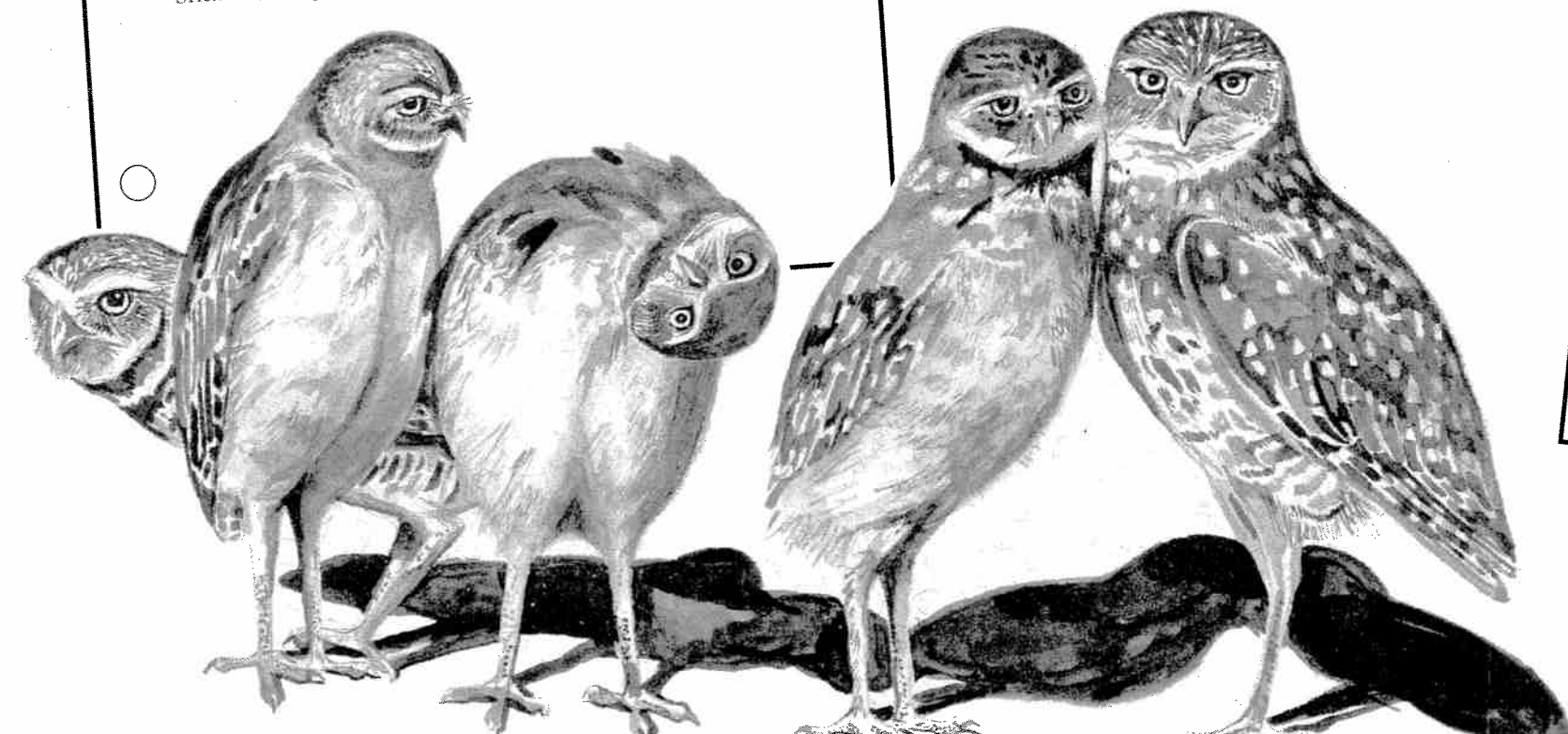
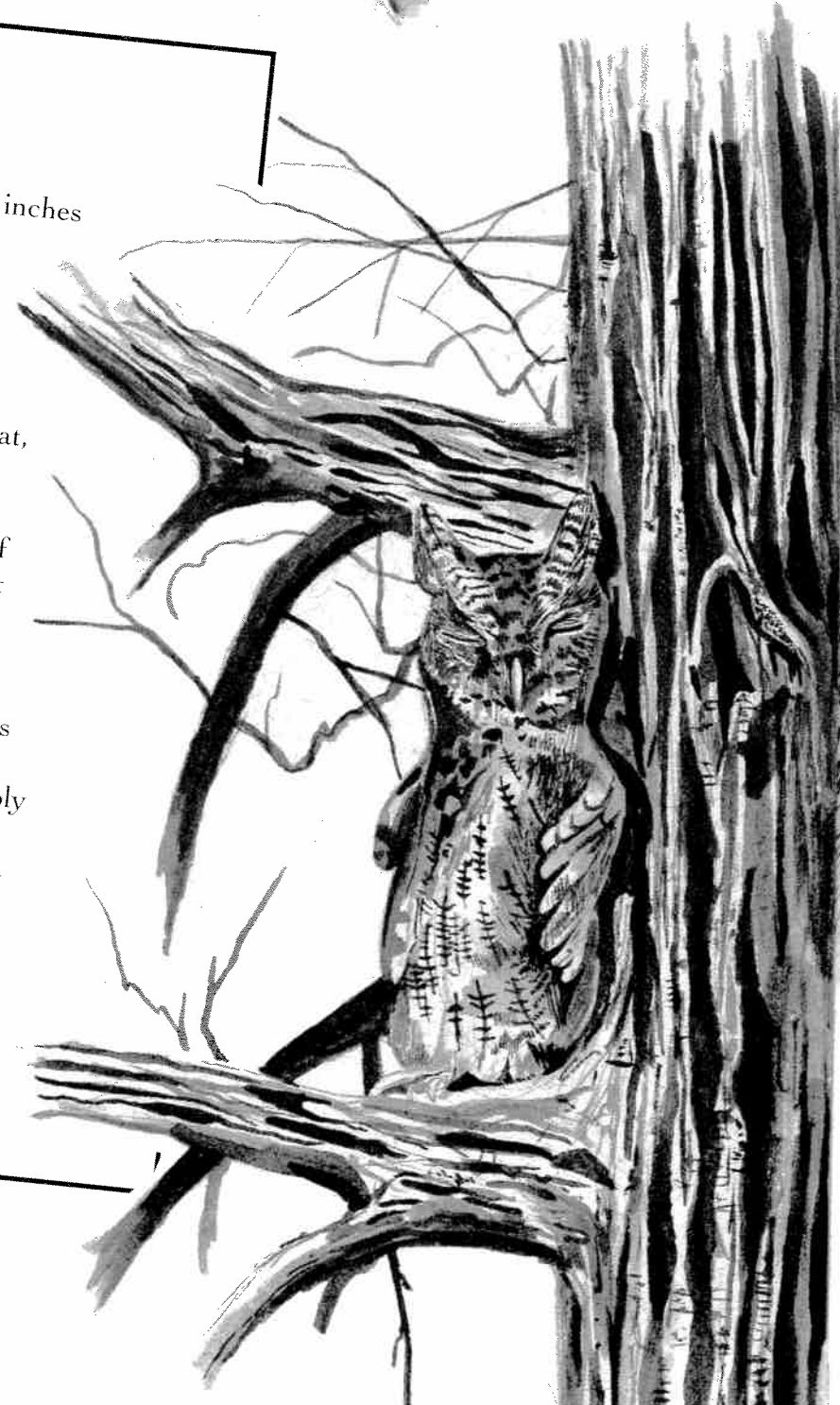
Size: 7-10 inches Wingspan: 20 inches

Description: A blocky-shaped small owl with ear tufts and gray or rusty-red plumage marked by streaks and bars. Ear tufts can be raised to be very prominent. When ear tufts are flat, the head looks rounded.

Field Notes: Riparian woodlands of northeastern Colorado are the haunt of eastern screech-owls. They also inhabit urban forests of mature deciduous trees in older neighborhoods and parks of Front Range cities. Eastern screech-owls may be more common in coniferous forests of the foothills than originally thought. Secretive, nocturnal and superbly camouflaged, they are best identified by their tremulous calls.

Habitat: Mature cottonwoodlands and urban forests of large maples and other deciduous trees

Diet: Small birds and mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects



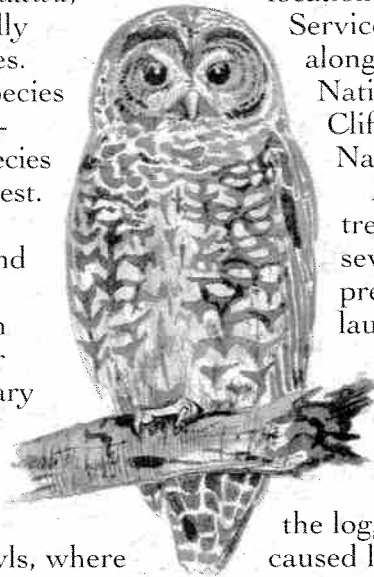
Have You Spotted A Spotted Owl?

A rare and secretive owl haunts the remote and rugged canyons of southern Colorado. It is the Mexican spotted owl, *Strix occidentalis lucida*, a medium-sized owl listed both federally and in Colorado as a threatened species.

This bird is the southwestern subspecies of the spotted owl, cousin to the better-known northern spotted owl, the subspecies of the old growth forests of the Northwest. Spotted owls are grayish-brown with round white spots on the head, neck and tail. They measure 16 to 19 inches in length. The eyes are brown rather than yellow, and the rounded head lacks ear tufts. The Mexican spotted owl's primary historic range is Mexico, Arizona and New Mexico, but it also inhabits areas of Texas, Utah and Colorado.

Steep, forested canyons are the favored habitat of Mexican spotted owls, where they live secretly among tall trees in the secluded canyon bottoms. They prefer mixed coniferous forests, especially of ponderosa pine with an understory of smaller pines or shrubs. They consistently avoid managed forests. In Colorado spotted owls are found also in piñon-juniper, lodgepole pine and Douglas-fir forests. They inhabit forests below 9,500 feet year-round.

The spotted owl remains Colorado's rarest owl.



Determined searching has turned up only occasional sightings. Presently there are owls at 15 known locations in Colorado, says U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Terry Ireland. Most of these are along the Front Range, two are in Mesa Verde National Park (they have been found nesting in Cliff Palace ruins) and one is in Dinosaur National Monument.

Mexican spotted owls hunt by moving from tree to tree, spending from a few seconds to several hours watching and listening for prey. They are "perch and dive" predators, launching their attacks at relatively short distances. Woodrats, deer mice and voles are important prey for them.

While the northern spotted owl has garnered much attention as the focus of conflicts between environmentalists and the logging industry, the Mexican spotted owl has caused little furor. The reason, says Gary Skiba, who handles endangered species issues for the Colorado Division of Wildlife, is that the forests inhabited by the Mexican subspecies are of little timber value and the rugged, remote country they prefer is unsuitable for development. One potential conflict involves a hard rock mine on State School Lands in Fremont County. The mine may impact spotted owls, says Ireland, if the State Land Board allows the mining activity to extend further north.

JOIN US IN A WATCHABLE WILDLIFE VIEWING SKILLS WORKSHOP "Wildlife Watch" is an 8 hour workshop covering where, when and how to see wildlife; wildlife identification; ecosystems; how to use binoculars and spotting scopes; ethics; the basics of wildlife management; and a field trip. Price is \$15 per person or household (not recommended for children under 12 due to length and intensity of class sessions). Workshops are held around the state. To find out about classes, call (303) 291-7258 or fax the hotline at (303) 291-7110.

Colorado's Wildlife Company; published quarterly; mailed free of charge. Permission granted for reproduction for educational and non-commercial uses only, with credit to writers, illustrators. Colorado's Wildlife Company, and the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Printed on 75% recycled paper. Send letters to the editor c/o Mary Taylor Young, Editor: P.O. Box 37351, Denver, CO 80237. For subscription changes or additions or to request back issues contact Renée Herring, Colorado Division of Wildlife, 6060 Broadway, Denver, CO 80216; (303)291-7258.

STATE OF COLORADO
Bill Owens, Governor
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
Greg Walcher, Executive Director



COLORADO DIVISION OF WILDLIFE
John W. Mumma, Director
6060 Broadway
Denver, CO 80216



GREAT OUTDOORS
COLORADO

RECEIVED

JAN 13 2000

STATE PUBLICATIONS
Colorado State Library

Address Service Requested

Bulk Rate
U.S. Postage
PAID
Denver, CO
Permit 1533