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# First confirmed Record of the Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) for the state of Yucatan, Mexico

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## Abstract

Here we report the first fully documented record of the Short-eared Owl for the state of Yucatan. Potential subspecies for the Yucatan Peninsula is discussed.

**Keywords:** Short-eared Owl, *Asio flammeus*, Yucatan, Mexico.

## Resumen

**Primer registro confirmado de *Asio flammeus* para el Estado de Yucatán, México**

Se reporta el primer registro adecuadamente documentado de Búho de Cuerno Corto (*Asio flammeus*) para el estado de Yucatán. Se discute la potencial subespecie del Búho de Cuerno Corto en la Península de Yucatán.

**Palabras clave:** búho cuerno corto, *Asio flammeus*, Yucatan, Mexico.

## Résumé

**Première observation du Hibou des marais pour l'état du Yucatan, Mexique**

Cette note présente la première observation documentée du Hibou des marais (*Asio flammeus*) pour l'état du Yucatan. Une discussion est présentée sur l'identification de la sous espèce du Hibou des marais pour l'état du Yucatan.

**Mots clés:** hibou des marais, *Asio flammeus*, Yucatan, Mexico.

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The Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) is widely distributed, with breeding populations in North America, Eurasia, South America, and various oceanic islands (Holt & Leasure 1993). In North America, Holarctic Short-eared Owl (*A. f. flammeus*) breeds across Canada and the northern U.S., and Antillean Short-eared Owl (*A. f. portoricensis*) is resident on Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico (AOU 1998). In Mexico, Holarctic Short-eared Owl is an irregularly uncommon to rare winterer October through March from the U.S. border south to central Mexico, though in most years it only reaches northwestern Mexico (Howell & Webb 1995). Within Mesoamerica, the nearest documented Short-eared Owl to Yucatan State is a single record from southern Belize, of unknown arrival date (Lee Jones et al. 2000).

Enríquez-Rocha et al. (1993) stated sight records of Short-eared Owl for both Yucatan and Quintana Roo states encountered during a literature review. After our own literature review, however, we could find no records of Short-eared Owl for either Yucatan or Quintana Roo. The inclusion of Short-eared Owl in *Check-list of the birds of the Yucatan Peninsula and its protected areas* (MacKinnon 1992) was based on a personal communication from A.R. Phillips to MacKinnon stating R. Dickerman had collected the species in his company on 16 November 1963 in southwestern Campeche (B. MacKinnon, pers. comm.). MacKinnon (2005) later noted it as a hypothetical species in the region due to lack of a catalogued specimen.

*Las Aves de Yucatán* (Hartig 1979) is the only publication cited in Enríquez-Rocha et al. (1993) listing Short-eared Owl for the state of Yucatan, however, it is based on a misinterpretation of scientific names. Hartig (1979) included the species based on *Strix flammea*, L. in *The Ethno-Botany of the Maya* (Roys 1931) and *Asio flammeus* in *Enciclopedia Yucatanense* (Pearse 1945). The co-existence of the scientific names *S. flammea* of Linnaeus, or Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*), and *S. flammea* of Pontopiddan, or Short-eared Owl, has caused confusion before (see Allen 1908). The listing of *Asio flammeus* in Pearse (1945) was based on *S. flammea*, L. in Roys (1931), a definite error in interpretation of scientific names where Pearse equaled *A. flammeus* with *S. flammea*, L. Roys (1931) may also have mistakenly equated *S. flammea* of Linnaeus with Short-eared Owl as he included both Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) and *S. flammea*, L. under the Mayan name 'tun-culuchhu', while Barn Owl was listed separately under the Mayan name 'xoch'. However, Roys (1931) did not provide a common English name for *S. flammea*, L. thus clarifying the species.

Thus, here we report the first confirmed record of Short-eared Owl for the state of Yucatán.

A single Short-eared Owl was discovered 8 February 2005 at the Las Coloradas salt ponds (21°34'N, 88°04'W), located in the northeastern corner of the state of Yucatan within the Ría Lagartos Biosphere Reserve.



Figure 1. Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) at Las Coloradas salt ponds, Yucatan, Mexico.

During a morning waterbird survey we flushed an owl from the road edge that flew approximately 150 meters away from us before landing next to a salt pond. The owl remained perched on the ground at the edge of the pond for several minutes permitting distant photographs to be taken (Fig. 1). The bird then flew towards and past us allowing excellent views in flight. We used 10x42 binoculars to observe the bird in flight, a 30x spotting scope to observe the bird while perched and a Nikon Coolpix 4300 digital camera for digiscoping.

The following notes were taken during and immediately following observation of the bird: "A rather large owl with dark brown head and upperparts; breast thickly streaked dark brown against a moderate buff-cinnamon wash; a distinctive, dark brown crescent on the underwing located at the carpal joint could be seen while the owl was in flight, underwings also moderately washed buff-cinnamon; wings long and arched, and flight floppy; when perched, two small but prominent ear tufts could be seen mid-forehead above the eyes; edges of facial disks dark brown; eyes bright yellow." Later analysis of photos

showed the owl's legs to be cinnamon-yellow in coloration.

Hoffman et al. (1999) concluded Antillean and Holarctic Short-eared Owl could be distinguished in the field if observed closely, with differences in the coloration of the upper back and underparts as the most reliable field marks. The owl we observed, however, was not seen or photographed well enough to differentiate between the two subspecies nor do the authors pretend to have ample familiarity in separating the two.

Antillean Short-eared Owl populations have recently increased and expanded in range throughout Cuba and Hispaniola (Raffaele et al. 1998). Dispersing individuals from the Greater Antilles have been encountered with greater frequency in southern Florida in recent decades, and potential colonization of Florida by the subspecies has been proposed (Hoffman et al. 1999). The Short-eared Owl is capable of crossing hundreds of kilometers of open ocean and has been a successful colonizer of remote islands such as Hawaii, Micronesia (Spennemann 2004) and the Galapagos (De Groot 1983). Suitable nesting habitat on Cuba includes a variety of croplands (Garrido 1984, Hoffman et al. 1999) of which much exists in Yucatan as at least a quarter of the state's forests have been converted to agricultural use (*fide* Kluza 1998).

Due to its proximity to Cuba, increasing Greater Antillean populations and availability of suitable habitat, we believe the potential exists for the Antillean Short-eared Owl to invade and even colonize the Yucatan Peninsula. The sole Belize record, consisting of desiccated partial remains, has not been identified to subspecies and presently consists of only a single wing (H. Lee Jones, pers. comm.).

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