



Owls of Montana Sounds

Birds communicate verbally to one another for many different reasons. **Songs**, used typically to establish territories and for finding a mate, are learned over time by the male and occasionally female. **Calls** can be heard in all seasons and are more instinctive. For more information about bird sounds and what they mean, visit audubon.org.

Working from the smallest Montana species to the largest:

The Flammulated Owl

These Owls are spread out through out the western side of the United States and Central America so their sounds are fairly uniform throughout their range. The male's song is a low monotonous "hoot" that it can repeat unendingly. The low hoot will be occasionally Followed by a 'bull frog' like lower, two-"hoot" trill



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Their alarm calls sound like a high pitch trumpet, two in a row with one second in between each series.

The babies will often make short, high pitched, screeches.

Along with their alarm calls, these owls can make hissing and clicking sounds when agitated.

To hear their various calls, visit allaboutbirds.org and youtube.com.

Second smallest owl species in Montana:

The Northern Pygmy-Owl

These tiny but fierce predators have a specific sound for the different regions that they live in.

Northern Pygmy-Owls in Montana are going to call differently than the ones in Oregon so depending on where they are found their sound could be slightly altered.



© Connor Stefanison Photography

The owls in MT have a song that is a series of high, hollow "toot"s Spaced about 4 seconds apart. Males and females will sometimes Sing simultaneously and the females will usually have a slightly higher pitch.

Their call is a rapid, high-pitched, short trill that is typically after their song. To hear their sounds visit online allaboutbirds.org.

Owls of Montana Sounds

Third Smallest owl species in Montana:

The Northern Saw-whet Owl

These owls are fairly widespread across the northern US but seem to have very similar songs throughout. It is a high-pitched “toot” repeatedly with about 2 notes per second. Males doing territorial calls can be heard up to half a mile away.



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Other males will respond to the territorial call with a quieter, faster, and lower-key version of the song. Females will also call back during courtship.

Their alarm calls will occasionally sound like a small siren going off. They can also do short squeaky calls repeatedly along with some high-pitched barks. To hear their various calls, visit, allaboutbirds.org

Fourth smallest owl species in Montana:

The Boreal Owl

These little owls can often be confused with Northern Saw-whet owls due to their similar appearance. They do, however, have a different song that can help to ID them properly.

Their songs are a rapid series of short high-pitched “hoo”s in a trill (about 8-10 “hoo”s in two seconds) that will get louder over time. In late winter and early spring the males will call for 20 minutes to up to 3 hours! The female’s song will mirror the male’s but they do not sing frequently.



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The males, females and juveniles all may give a quick chirp or “kew” sound year-round. The Boreal owls in North America (which can be referred to as the “Richardson’s owl”) can contain more notes and is slightly slower than the those in Europe (which can be referred to as the “Tengmalm’s owl”). To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org.



Owls of Montana

Sounds

Fifth Smallest owl species in Montana: The Western Screech-Owl

These owls can be extremely difficult to tell from the Eastern Screech-Owl due to their very similar appearances. Luckily, not only do they live almost fully west of the Rockies, they also have a very different song from their eastern relatives.

Their songs can be heard at dusk and can continue into the night sounding a bit like a bouncing ball. A trill of 5-9 short, high-pitched “hoot”s speeding up at the end like a ball does as it hits the ground. The females and males will often duet when they are a mated pair, the female being the higher pitched sound. To stay in contact, the pairs will use a short “double trill” call that sounds like a small “chirp” sound. To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org.



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Sixth smallest owl species in Montana: The Eastern Screech-Owl



Gray Morph

© David Wade | Macaulay Library



Red Morph

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Their primary song is a low, even-pitched whistle trill followed by a descending high-pitched (shrill) “whinny” sound similar to a horse’s whinny. The low whistle can be used to keep pairs in contact with one another and the whinny is often used to defend territories. Mated pairs will sing one after another to each other any time of the day or night.

Their calls are commonly soft, low “hoot”s; loud alarm “bark”s; or, as their name suggests, “screech” sounds to defend nests. To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org or audubon.org

Owls of Montana Sounds

Smallest medium owl species in Montana:

The Burrowing Owl



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This owl species is not especially vocal but can do a large variety of sounds. Like some other species, their song and call changes slightly based on their region. In most parts of the US where these birds are found, their song is a two-note “*coo*” with a short under “*hoot*” at the end of each sequence. The farther south you get (into Brazil and Argentina) it becomes just a two-note “*coo*”. The song is typically done by the male during mating season and for territorial defense. The owls are typically diurnal, so their calls are most likely heard during the daytime.

Their calls in the US are a repetitive “*chirp*” sound and the young owls have an “*eep*” call to the adults for food and alarm. The more southern burrowing owls sound more like a songbird, with a raspy “*chir-chirp*” repetition.

Due to these birds living on the ground in open habitats often shared with rattle snakes, it is very beneficial for them to make rattling noises like rattlesnakes to ward off predators. To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org and youtube.com for the rattlesnake sound.

Second Smallest medium owl species in Montana:

The Short-eared Owl

The song of the Short-eared Owl is a series of a dozen or more hoots that is typically sung by the male during courtship. These owls are often daytime hunters, so their calls are more likely heard during the day. During courtship, these birds can be seen doing “sky dancing” where they hit their wings below them making a clapping sound three to six times in a row.

Both the males and females may make a bark, screech, or cluck call to defend the nest or offspring. Otherwise, these birds are not especially vocal.

To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org.



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Owls of Montana Sounds

Third smallest medium owl species in Montana:

The Long-eared owl Owl

These birds are silent for most of the year except during breeding season they will give a series of 10 to more than 200 “who” sounds that are spaced 2 to 4 seconds apart. The hoots are low and sound like blowing air across the top of a bottle. These songs can be heard more than half a mile away from the bird.

Their alarm calls have a large range from barks and squeals to a raspy “mew” sound. To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org



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Fourth smallest medium owl species in
Montana:

The Northern Hawk Owl



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This bird is not commonly found in the US but when food sources are low following a good breeding season, they will shift down into the northern states, including MT. The males will sing a rolling whistled “udududud” sound that lasts up to about 14 seconds during display flights. This is typically to attract a mate. The females sing a similar song that is shorter and more hoarse sounding.

The alarm call is a sharp screech followed by short raspy chirps. Fledglings will sound similar but higher pitched. To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org.

Owls of Montana

Sounds

Largest medium owl species in Montana:

The Barn Owl

This owl species does not have a hoot song like many owls do. It instead has a raspy scream that can last a few seconds. The males typically sing so that females will look at their suggested nesting site. The females will not typically use it unless asking the males for food.

Their alarm call is a loud “hissss” like scream that can last around 4 seconds. Females also give little cricket sounding chidders called a purring call. To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org.



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Smallest large owl species in Montana:

The Barred Owl

The Barred owl song is most easily remembered as “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?”. The sound being “*hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo... hoo, hoo, hoo, hooahh*” with a rasp at the end of each “*hoo*”. It is used to call in a mate and claim territory. Males and females both will make this call. During courtship, mated pairs will duet this call adding in caw like sounds that sometimes sound like strange monkey calls.



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The young do a high-pitched screech that lasts about 2 seconds. To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org.

Owls of Montana Sounds

Third largest owl species in Montana (tallest):

The Great Gray Owl



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This is the most common of species of owl that you can find in the US and makes the “typical owl sound” that you would expect. The songs pattern is “Who’s up late? Me too” and sounds like “*hoo-h’HOO--hooo-hooo*”. There are different variations of this hoot depending on the individual. Some of their song’s may have a “bouncing ball” beat in it. The male and female may call alternating each other and the female’s call will be a higher pitch than the males. The females will also make a shriek like call to ask for food from the male.

The young do a high-pitched screech to call for food and may do this call until they are in their second year. To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org.

During the breeding season (from March–July), males and females give a low-pitched series of resonating “*hoo*”s for about 10 “*hoo*”s with about 30 seconds between calls. The female’s song is higher pitched than the males.

Males will defend territories with a soft “*ooo, ooh*” lifting in pitch slightly at the end. Juveniles will screech for food and chitter when being fed, as will the adults when feeding. To hear these songs, visit allaboutbirds.org

Second largest owl species in Montana
(very close second to the snowy owl):

The Great Horned Owl



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Owls of Montana

Sounds

The (arguably) largest owl species in Montana:

The Snowy Owl



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Both sexes of this owl species make a low, raspy, quick “hoo” twice in a row typically but may include up to six hoots. These songs can be heard for up to seven miles on the tundra. These owls will also do a high-pitched whistle or creaky, repeated “rah” sound when threatened.

To hear these sounds, visit allaboutbirds.org.

Some adult males are completely white while the females have large amounts of black barring like in the picture above.

Most owl species will make a clacking noise with their beak when they are threatened.



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