

DANIEL J. COX



Northern Pygmy-Owl

Glaucidium gnoma***

By Tom Dickson

* Likely from the Greek *glaukidion*, for “glaring.”

** Perhaps from the New Latin *gnomus*, meaning “dwarflike,” or from the Greek *gnomon*, “to have knowledge,” an attribute once given to owls.

If you live in western Montana and the chickadees at your bird feeder occasionally scatter wildly in the middle of the day, a northern pygmy-owl may be nearby.

Identification

This smallest of Montana owls is only slightly larger than a soda can. It weighs just 2.5 ounces, with females slightly larger than males, and has a 15-inch wingspan. The plump, round-headed bird is mostly gray or brown with white spots on its head, back, and wings; dark vertical marks streak the light-colored belly. The eyes and beak are yellow. When northern pygmy-owls raise their small ear tufts in alarm, they look like miniature great horned owls.

On the back of the bird’s head is a pair of dark, oval spots that look like large eyes. The “eyespot” are thought to ward off black-capped chickadees and red-breasted nuthatches that often mob the pint-sized raptor, says Denver Holt, founder and director of the Owl Research Institute, located between Missoula and Flathead Lake.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

Feeding

Most species of owls hunt by night and prey almost entirely on meadow voles and other small mammals. The northern pygmy-owl hunts by day, and birds comprise roughly 40 percent of its diet. The small owl also eats small mammals such as squirrels, as well as amphibians, snakes, and even insects.

The raptor attacks a small bird from a perch and grabs the prey with its talons, using its beak to snap the neck. The little owl will attack birds half again as large as itself, including northern flickers and American robins. The owl’s adorable face and tiny size belie its ferocity. “Bloodthirsty” and “rapacious” is how nature writer Arthur C. Bent colorfully described this miniature raptor in 1938.

Like other owls, the northern pygmy-owl lacks a crop (expanded section of esophagus), where it can store food it can’t consume right away. Instead, the owl hides remnants of its kill for later consumption.

Habitat and distribution

The northern pygmy-owl lives in a wide range of mountainous habitats, including

open and mixed conifer forests, hardwood bottomlands, and wetlands.

The raptor is widely distributed west of the Rocky Mountains from British Columbia to Mexico.

Reproduction

Northern pygmy-owls nest in dead aspen cavities with a diameter of approximately 2.5 inches. Holes of this size are made when branches fall off or by small woodpeckers. Breeding begins in April, when males vocalize from the nesting hole with a *toot*—pause—*toot* call. When a female responds, he finds her and they mate. The male hunts while the female incubates the three to eight eggs.

Owlets fledge (leave the nest) after 30 days and become fully independent 20 to 30 days later.

Status

Though rarely seen except around bird feeders, the northern pygmy-owl is not considered rare or endangered. Populations appear healthy and stable throughout the species’ range in Montana and elsewhere in North America—unlike many raptor populations that are declining because of habitat loss and other environmental stresses. One reason is the northern pygmy-owl’s diverse diet, allowing it to eat pretty much whatever is available.

“As long as they have cavities in aspen snags to nest in, and forest managers continue to leave diverse sizes of snags, they will probably do okay,” Holt says. 🦉