

SPECIES OF THE MONTH**FLAMMULATED OWL**

JUNE 2026

In high-elevation pine forests of Arizona, a low-frequency hooting during the spring often suggests the presence of a large owl. It may be surprising then to find one of the state's smallest owls, the Flammulated Owl (*Psiloscops flammeolus*). This common raptor of the montane pine forests of western United States and Mexico has a specialized syringeal anatomy such that it produces hoarse, low-frequency notes sounding like those of much larger owls. The species is also well known for its ventriloquial hoots, which contribute to its reputation for being secretive and hard to locate. Consequently, there is much that is not known about its distribution throughout its range, including Arizona.

Unlike the slightly larger Western Screech-Owl (*Megascops kennicottii*) and Whiskered Screech-Owl (*M. trichopsis*), the Flammulated Owl is migratory. In March, it arrives in southern Arizona from wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America. Being insectivorous and faced with a dwindling food supply, Flammulated Owls abandon western pine forests beginning in August to fly about 290 km per day to their wintering grounds. Migration reaches its peak in September. There is a scattering of October reports in Arizona, the majority of which are from the Phoenix metropolitan area, Maricopa County. The only report between November and February is of a bird photographed on 6 December 2018 at Patagonia Lake State Park, Santa Cruz County. Flammulated Owls have been reported at least once from every Arizona county except La Paz.

The Flammulated Owl typically nests in high-elevation coniferous forests, utilizing woodpecker holes and natural cavities for nesting. In Arizona, nests have been observed in ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), Gambel oak (*Quercus gambelii*), Arizona cypress (*Hesperocyparis arizonica*), Arizona sycamore (*Platanus wrightii*), and quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*). It feeds primarily on nocturnal insects such as moths, crickets, and beetles. Peak foraging occurs within 1 hour after sunset and before sunrise.

Unlike screech-owls and other small owls, the Flammulated Owl has dark eyes. It has short, rounded ear tufts and its overall plumage is wavy, mottled gray overall with streaks of rufous and black. Although the plumage varies geographically, the species does not have distinct gray and rufous variants like screech-owls.

The Flammulated Owl is not officially listed as a species of conservation concern either by the U.S. or Arizona governments. However, it is highly vulnerable to habitat changes due to its reliance on old-growth ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forests for breeding.



Flammulated Owl, Oro Valley, Pima County, 9 October 2024. Photo by Andrew Core