

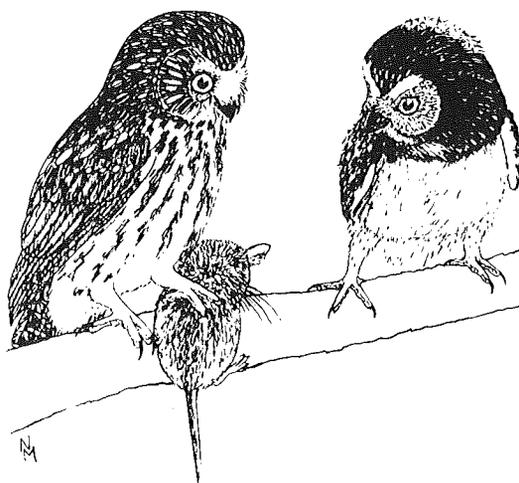
Northern Saw-whet Owl

Aegolius acadicus

An exclusively New World bird, the Northern Saw-whet Owl nests across the southern half of Canada (from extreme southern Alaska to Prince Edward Island) and the northern half of the U.S., as well as in the western mountains well into Mexico, and in the Appalachians into North Carolina. The smallest of the eastern owls—at 91 grams (3.3 oz), it is half the weight of a screech-owl—the Saw-whet is most commonly associated with deep woods, particularly wet coniferous woods.

The Northern Saw-whet Owl is noted for two behavioral quirks: allowing a close approach—even handling—by humans at its daytime roost, and poking its head out of the entrance hole when its nesting tree is rapped. Despite its “tameness,” the Saw-whet is a retiring and usually quiet bird; hence its presence is often overlooked. Atlas Project workers found the species sprinkled through all regions of Vermont. Not surprisingly, fieldworkers located the species most frequently by its call (s), for Saw-whets are easy to locate only during late winter and spring, when courting males deliver an endless, monotonic, single-noted whistle or, less often, the *skreee-awe*, *skree-awe*, *skree-awe* call for which the bird is named.

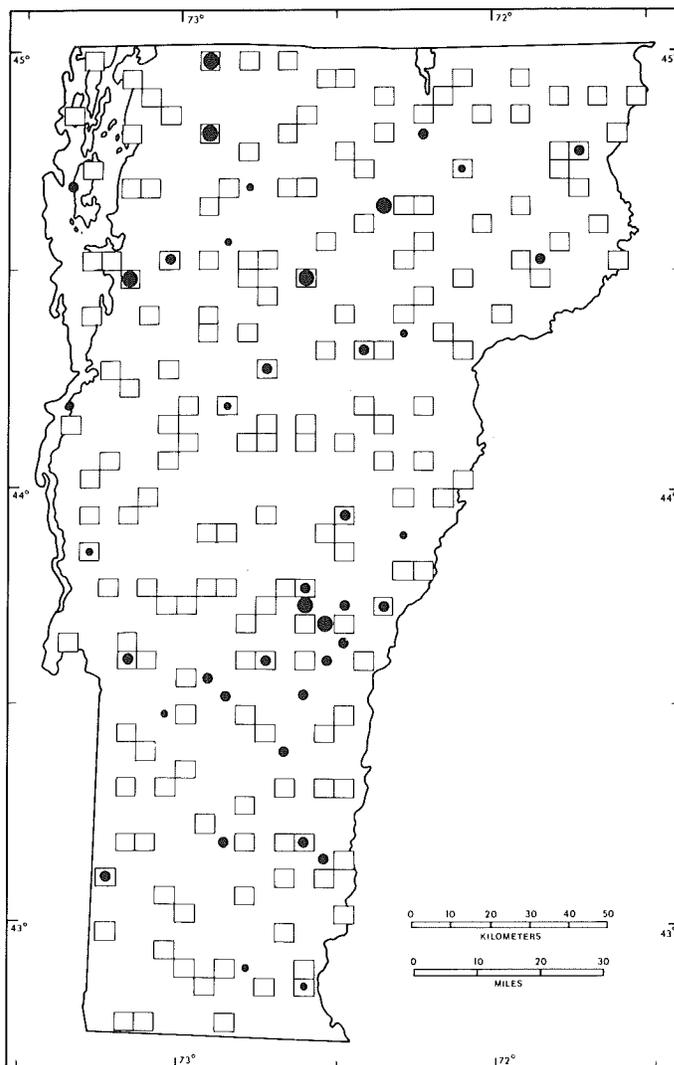
Saw-whets typically nest in old woodpecker holes (especially those of Northern Flickers and Hairy Woodpeckers) that are 6–18 m (20–60 ft) above the forest floor, but occasionally lower or higher. They will rarely choose natural cavities or bird boxes. The usual clutch of 5 to 7 white eggs is laid in the unimproved nesting cavity, most often in April in New England. Occasionally a lined nest is found, but most investigators agree with Bent (1938), who ascribed such work to an intervening occupant—a squirrel or a mouse. The Saw-whet female performs most or all of the 4-week incubation chores, and the asynchronously hatched nestlings are tiny, helpless, and blind. After 2 weeks, however, the white down begins to give way to the rich chocolate brown juvenile plum-



age that the young wear into their first autumn. Dates for dependent young in Vermont range from early June to early July.

A radio-tagged Northern Saw-whet Owl released in late fall in Minnesota (Forbes and Warner 1974) provided a rare glimpse into the night life of this species. The owl hunted and roosted over favored sections of a 114 ha (281 a) range. Consistently active from about 20 minutes after sunset to about 20 minutes before sunrise, the owl spent its nights in alternate periods of activity (chasing prey, changing perches) and inactivity (presumably spent on a perch watching for prey). Before the first snowfall it hunted mainly in wooded country, after which it spent more time hunting in open country. Forbes and Warner (1974) speculated that white-footed mice and red-backed voles became harder to hear after the first snowfall, and thus the owl sought the more visible deer mice and meadow voles in open grassland. Terres (1980) claimed that insects constitute the bulk of Saw-whet prey, but all other contemporary authorities agree with earlier investigators (Scott 1938) that these owls feed primarily on rodents, a diet supplemented by small birds, shrews, bats, and insects.

The question of whether the Northern Saw-whet Owl is sedentary, migratory, or periodically incursive has long been debated. We now know that northern populations are regularly migratory, and points



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 19 (11%)
 Possible breeding: 4 (21% of total)
 Probable breeding: 11 (58% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 4 (21% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

| | no. of priority blocks | % of region's priority blocks | % of species' total priority blocks |
|---------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| Champlain Lowlands | 5 | 16 | 26.3 |
| Green Mountains | 4 | 7 | 21.0 |
| North Central | 2 | 10 | 10.5 |
| Northeast Highlands | 1 | 6 | 5.2 |
| East Central | 2 | 10 | 10.5 |
| Taconic Mountains | 2 | 12 | 10.5 |
| Eastern Foothills | 3 | 13 | 16.0 |

where passage birds concentrate have been located from the Great Lakes east to the Atlantic coast. Banders working at one of these locations—Prince Edward Point, Ontario, which juts eastward off the north shore of Lake Ontario—netted a total of 1,128 Northern Saw-whet Owls during four autumns in the 1970s (Weir et al. 1980). They found that large flights—like those of most other migratory species—correlated with the clear skies and northwesterly winds of an approaching high pressure cell. The principal owl migration occurred during October.

Although some Northern Saw-whet Owls winter to the northern limit of the breeding

range, many winter well south of that range, and a few go as far south as the Gulf Coast. Saw-whets were reported in Vermont for each winter from 1973 to 1983 by *Records of Vermont Birds*.

ALAN PISTORIUS