

## **HUDSONIA HARLEM VALLEY BIODIVERSITY MANUAL SUPPLEMENT**

### **Northern saw-whet owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) NHP G5 S3, NYS P**

#### **Habitats in the Study Area**

Wet woods, swamps, or floodplain forests, deciduous or mixed, usually with shrub thickets. Dead or dying trees with cavities provide nesting sites. Dense stands of conifers, including upland groves of eastern red cedar (Bull 1964) serve as roosting sites.

#### **Study Area Distribution**

Specific reports include a report of a breeding pair in Millbrook (Pink & Waterman 1980), a possible breeding record in Washington County, north of Rensselaer County and a confirmed breeding in Albany County (Andrle & Carroll 1988). DeOrsey and Butler (2006) reported nesting near Sharon, Connecticut. Saw-whet owl probably breeds on the Rensselaer plateau in suitable habitat. Sightings of this owl are widespread in Dutchess County (Pink & Waterman 1980), and most of New York State (Bull 1964). Kiviat (personal communication) heard saw-whet owl song twice in 20 years in the Town of Milan.

#### **Other Relevant Aspects of Ecological Niche and Behavior**

Hunts at night, mainly insects and small rodents, but may take frogs, bats, and small birds. Asymmetric ears facilitate accurate location of prey by hearing alone (Cannings 1993). Often perches on a low branch, waiting for movement of prey, or may patrol edges of open habitats, flying near the ground. Breeds March through May. Nests in natural cavities or old woodpecker holes, 2 - 12 m above ground. Clutches average 5-6 eggs. Female incubates; male brings her food and defends territory. Eggs hatch in 25-28 days, young fledge in 4-5 weeks. Perches with two toes forward and tail held downward. Short body and long wings make it appear bat-like in flight. Migratory, also tends to change areas of residence unpredictably (Gentes & McQueen, 2002).

#### **Description and Identification**

Smallest owl in the region, about the weight of a robin; height 17.8 to 21.6 cm.; wingspan 45 to 60 cm, female slightly larger than male. Lacking ear tufts. Dark bill, eyes with yellow irides, heavily feathered legs and feet, tail with three bars, reddish-brown body with white abdominal streaks. Large, round head; grayish facial disk streaked with white on the top.

#### **Threats and Conservation**

Susceptible to severe winter storms and sudden drops in overnight temperature (Eckert, 1974). Like all owls, this small species is threatened by habitat destruction and fragmentation. A hole-nesting species, saw whet owl is threatened by removal of dead trees (Cannings 1993). Saw-whet owls may suffer more mortality than other owl species from motor vehicles (DeOrsey and Butler 2006).

#### **Survey Technique Constraints**

Saw-whet owl responds to audio lures (recorded calls or facsimiles) (Gentes & McQueen, 2002). Many individuals are so unperturbed by humans that they can be closely approached and rather easily captured (Bull 1964). In 1975 in Carroll County, Ohio, Barbour (personal observation) observed a saw-whet owl

feeding on moths attracted to an outdoor light. Such encounters are no doubt unusual and unpredictable, but they indicate possible situations in which to search for this owl.

### **References to Identification Literature**

Andrle, R. F. and J. R. Carroll. 1988. The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY. 551 p.

Eckert, A. W. 1974. The owls of North America (north of Mexico). Doubleday & Co., Garden City, NY. 278 p.

Long, Kim. 1998. Owls - A wildlife handbook. Johnson Books, Boulder, CO. 186 p.

### **References cited**

Bull, J. 1964. Birds of the New York Area. Harper and Row, New York. 540 p.

Cannings, R.J. 1993. Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*). In The Birds of North America, No 42 (A Poole and F. Gill, Eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D.C.: The American Ornithologists' Union. 20 p.

DeOrsey, S and B. A. Butler. 2006. The birds of Dutchess County, New York; Today and yesterday: A survey of current status with historical changes since 1870. Ralph T. Waterman Bird Club and Grinnell and Lawton Publishing. Millbrook, New York. 274 p. + species list.

Gentes, C. and H. McQueen, 2002. Banding saw-whet owls at Hopkins Memorial Forest, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Website: Massbird.org, sponsored by Bird Observer: the New England birding journal. [http://www.massbird.org/noho/birds/owl\\_sw/](http://www.massbird.org/noho/birds/owl_sw/)

Pink, E, and O. Waterman. Birds of Dutchess County, 1965-1979. Ralph t. Waterman Bird Club. Poughkeepsie, NY. 93 p.



Photo: Nature Pics