

[From Winter 1999]

## Owls Set Record

The blustery northeast winds on Sunday evening, November 7, may have kept most Eastern Shore residents comfortably indoors, but for the northern saw-whet owls, it was time to migrate. The favorable winds, clear skies, and plummeting temperatures combined to produce a new East Coast record of 180 total owl captures. It broke the 1995 saw-whet invasion of 126 birds on a single night. The lower Delmarva peninsula has definitely emerged as an important corridor for migrating saw-whets.

Since 1994, the Eastern Shore Of Virginia NWR has been one of three trapping stations being operated by the Center for Conservation Biology, College of William & Mary. Trapping begins on the third week of October and continues through mid-December. Owl-banders, Brian Sullivan and Bart Paxton have been working the graveyard shift running nets and processing birds in efforts to study the fall migration of this species on the lower Delmarva peninsula.



Currently, a total of 477 sawwhets have been trapped and banded, which is a significant increase from the 22 caught all last year. The large numbers this year are possibly linked to prey availability and improved breeding success in Canada.

For those of you who may not have had a face-to-feather encounter with this owl, it generally becomes active an hour after sunset and retreats to roost during the day. The northern saw-whet is the smallest owl in eastern North America, with an average weight of 70-100 grams and height around 8 inches.

The saw-whet, sometimes called the sparrow owl, gets its name from the sound that resembles a long crosscut saw being sharpened. It spends most of the night hunting for meadow voles, field mice, shrews and insects. When prey is abundant, the saw-whet owl will kill as many as 6 mice without consuming any of them. The owls cache the excess food in safe places and, in winter, thaw it out later by brooding the frozen carcasses.

The saw-whets have a high mortality rate and live for an average of 5 years. However, captive owls have lived as long as 17 years. They must compete with boreal owls, starlings, and squirrels for nest cavities, and are also preyed upon by larger owls, martens, and Cooper's hawks. Saw-whet owls are particularly susceptible to collisions with vehicles because they fly low in search of prey and hunt by sound rather than sight.

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