

INTRODUCTION TO

Northern Saw-Whet Owls

and Project OwlNet at the Indiana Dunes

by Alexandra Forsythe



This booklet is intended to be a brief introduction to Northern Saw-Whet Owls.

It is a free download from

MidwestBirdWatching.com

Northern Saw-Whet Owls

and Project Owlnet at the Indiana Dunes

by Alexandra Forsythe

What do they look like?

How big are Northern Saw-Whet Owls?

How can you identify them?

How can you tell the difference between males and females?

What do the eggs look like?

What sounds do they make?

Do Northern Saw-Whet Owls make the stereotypical hooting sound?

Do they have one consistent call, or do they have several calls?



What do they eat?

What types of food are in a Northern Saw-Whet Owl's diet?

How much can one owl eat in a year?

How can owls help you and me?

Where do they live?

Will I ever see a Northern Saw-Whet Owl in my yard?

Do other countries or continents have Northern Saw-Whets?



What is Project Owlnet?

What does Project Owlnet do?

How are the owls caught and banded?

What type of information does Project Owlnet collect?

How can I help Project Owlnet?

What can I do to help?

What can I do at home to help owls?

Are there programs that I could participate in?



This booklet is intended to be an introduction to Northern Saw-Whet Owls. The questions above are answered within these pages, along with a host of additional information. If you have more questions, feel free to contact me at Indy.bird.luvr@gmail.com.

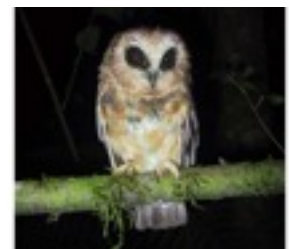
For information about most of the birds commonly found in the Midwest, go to:

MidwestBirdWatching.com



**The owl I adopted:
"Nightshade"**

In this booklet, the terms "Saw-Whet Owls," "Saw-Whets," and "NSWO" refer to the Northern Saw-Whet Owl. There is an Unspotted Saw-Whet Owl, but it only lives in Central America.





Adult

Saw-whets are very small owls. As adults they weigh approximately 88 grams and they are about 8" tall, so they are a bit heavier than an American Robin but shorter than robins from head to tail (American robins weigh about 80 grams and are about 10 inches long).

The identifying characteristics are:

- No ear tufts
- Face white, outlined in brown and white
- White "V" shape between the eyes
- Underparts are white streaked with reddish brown
- Eyes are yellow
- Bill is black
- Body is broad
- Tail is short

Females are slightly heavier than males. Females weigh over 88 grams, while the males weigh less than 88 grams.

They look quite similar to Boreal Owls, but a Boreal Owl has spots on the forehead as opposed to streaks, a dark "V" on the face in addition to a white "V" and a yellowish, not solid black, beak.



Fledgling

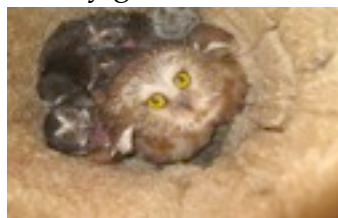
The fledgling, or juvenile, has softer, more blended markings.

The identifying characteristics are:

- No ear tufts
- Face white, outlined in brown with no streaking
- White "V" shape between the eyes
- Underparts are reddish brown
- Eyes are yellow
- Bill is black
- Body is broad
- Tail is short

Like the adults, the fledglings look quite similar to Boreal Owl fledglings, but there are some differences. A Boreal Owl fledgling has streaking on the underparts, turning pale toward the tail, but a Saw-Whet fledgling has reddish brown underparts with no streaking.

The fledglings keep their juvenile plumage for about a year before they grow their adult feathers.



Eggs and Nest

Saw-whet owls are secondary cavity nesters. That is, they prefer to take over an abandoned nest, like a hole in a tree that was once used by a Northern Flicker or Pileated Woodpecker.

They prefer holes in trees in the forests of Canada and the extreme northern portion of the United States. They also prefer to be about 14 to 60 feet above the ground.

The nest material is composed solely of breast feathers.

Saw-whets usually have 5 to 6 eggs which they lay in intervals of 1 to 3 days from April to July.

The eggs are very small and often perfectly round. They look very similar in size and shape to ping-pong balls (about 28 millimeters in diameter).

The eggs hatch in 21 to 28 days. The chicks leave the nest in 4 to 5 weeks. They are able to fly, but the parents continue to feed them for at least a month. The chicks become independent at about 8 weeks and start families of their own when they are about a year old.



What sounds do Saw-Whets make?

Saw-Whet Owls make different sounds depending on the circumstances. The typical sound they make, especially when attempting to attract a mate, is a steady high-pitched, monotone “toot” whistle repeated twice per second.

When a Saw-Whet Owl is angry or scared, it makes a clicking noise with its beak. Occasionally, they make a rasping sound like a saw being whetted.



What Do Saw-Whet Owls Eat?



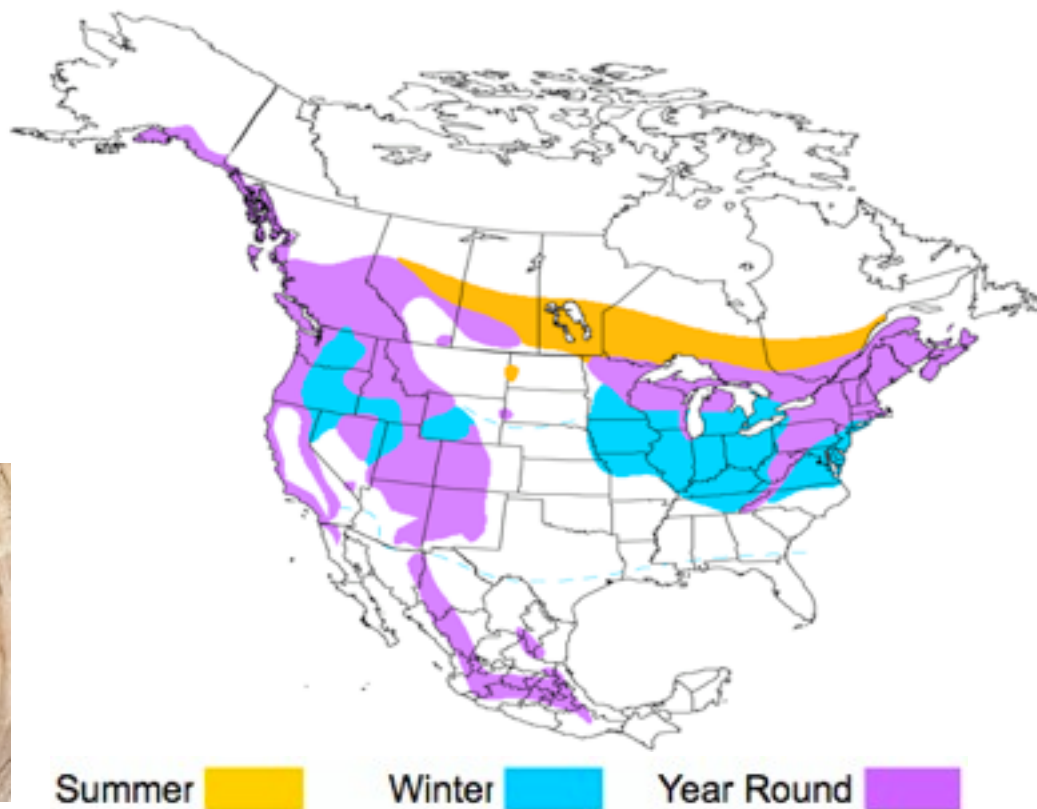
The favorite menu items of Saw-Whet Owls are small rodents such as mice, voles, shrews and moles. One owl can catch up to 300 mice per year. 300! That doesn't even take into account the number of offspring those mice would have had (one pair of mice can result in thousands of mice in just one year)! Saw-Whets may also eat larger mammals such as chipmunks, and they will sometimes eat insects and small birds.

Where Do Saw-Whet Owls Live?

Northern Saw-Whet Owls are found only in North America. Depending on the season, they are found in deciduous or coniferous forests or in woodlots, swamps and shade trees.

During migration and winter, they can be found in a variety of habitats: forests, woodlots, swamps and backyard shade trees. Fortunately for birders, they sometimes roost on low, open branches during the day where they can be seen and photographed. It is important to note that if you do find a Saw-Whet Owl, do not disturb or frighten it. Simply admire the owl, take a few pictures, and let it sleep. Owls need their rest as much as people do!

During nesting season, the owls are found in all types of forest within its range: coniferous, deciduous and mixed forests. The female chooses the nest site and after she leaves, the male stays behind to defend the nest site.



Banding an Owl

In order to catch a Saw-Whet Owl, we set up special mist nets in a cross pattern just before dark. Then we use a very loud mating call with a speaker system we call "Owl-E."

Owl-E is as loud as an air horn (100-110 decibels) so that owls flying overhead can hear it clearly. We check the nets every hour or so to see if an owl has been caught.

Once we catch an owl, we have to remove the owl very carefully. Sometimes a particularly spirited owl will become tangled in the net. When that happens, we sometimes have to cut the net to free the owl.

We place the owl in cloth bag to carry it back to the Nature Center. Once there, we carefully place the owl in a tube to keep it from injuring itself. We weigh the owl, then we place a band on its leg with an identification number that will be unique to that owl.

We measure the owl's beak and the wing chord. Next, we examine the wing feathers to determine the approximate age of the owl. To do this, we shine a black light on the wing. When the black light hits the wing, certain portions may turn pink. The more pink there is, the older the owl.

Once we are finished recording all of the information, the owl is ready to be adopted by someone like you!



A graphic consisting of the word "SUPPORT" written in white capital letters on a row of red, three-dimensional rectangular blocks. The blocks are arranged in a slightly staggered fashion, and the word is reflected on a surface below them.

Support owl research programs like Project OwlNet and your local parks, nature centers, and wildlife rehabilitation centers.

A graphic with the text "Adopt an" in a simple font above the word "OWL" in a larger, bold font. A stylized black silhouette of an owl is positioned between the two words, with its body forming the letter 'O'.

When you adopt an owl, you will gain the satisfaction of knowing you are helping the entire species.

A graphic featuring several colorful hands (blue, orange, yellow, purple, green) raised in a gesture of volunteering. Below the hands, the word "VOLUNTEER" is written in white capital letters on a dark rectangular background.

Volunteer to help at your local park, nature center, or wildlife rehabilitation facility. They always need and welcome volunteers!

A green, circular button with a slight 3D effect and a white border. The words "LEARN MORE" are written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the center.

Learn more about owls from your local library, nature center, wildlife rehabilitation center or naturalist. The more you know, the more you can help the owls!

A logo for "BACKYARD HABITAT". It features a stylized illustration of a blue bird perched on a green leafy branch, set against a yellow circular background. Below the illustration, the words "BACKYARD HABITAT" are written in a blue, sans-serif font.

Use wildlife-friendly plants and features when landscaping. Keep your pets indoors so they won't harm or disturb the wildlife, and always spay or neuter your pets.

A photograph of a young owl perched on a green branch. The text "Wildlife Rehabilitation" is overlaid in white at the top of the image.

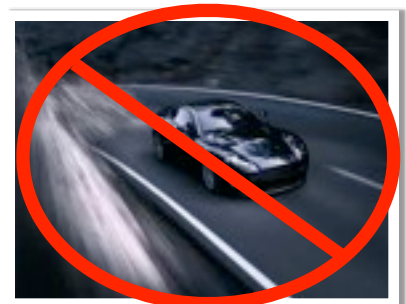
If you find an injured owl, NEVER try to treat it yourself. Instead, cover it with a weighted box or laundry basket and call your vet, DNR or local wildlife rehabilitator.

A photograph of a yellow and red box of "D-CON" mouse poison. The box features the text "D-CON", "Bait Pellets II", and "KILLS MICE". A large red circle with a diagonal slash is superimposed over the entire image, indicating that the use of this product is prohibited.

Never use rat or mouse poison or other pesticides; it kills the owls when they eat the poisoned mice. The loss of that one owl will result in at least 299 mice surviving. Use traps instead, or let the owls do your work for you!

A photograph of a person in a green shirt and cap holding a rifle, aiming it. A large red circle with a diagonal slash is superimposed over the image, indicating that hunting is prohibited.

Never harm an owl. Not only is it illegal, it is also unnecessary. While some fear that owls will harm chickens or pets, it is highly unlikely, especially if you are a responsible owner who provides nighttime shelter for your animals.

A photograph of a car driving on a road at night, with its headlights illuminating the path. A large red circle with a diagonal slash is superimposed over the image, indicating that driving at night is prohibited.

When driving at night, remember to slow down. Owls hunt at night, often along roadways since the rodents are easily spotted there. Nighttime drivers injure and kill more owls than any other cause. Please use caution!

**Indiana Dunes State Park
Interpretive Services
Saw-whet Owl Migration Project**

This is to certify that

Alexandra Forsythe

has adopted Northern Saw-whet Owl Band No. 0924-35970



Banding Date: October 28, 2011

Location: Indiana Dunes State Park, Chesterton, IN

Age: Second Year Sex: Female

Brad Bumgardner
Brad Bumgardner, Interpretive Naturalist
Federal Permit #22730-V



Adopt an owl today!

Wouldn't you love to have a cute little Saw-Whet Owl to call your own? You can! And you don't even have to buy food or a cage. All you have to do is adopt one today from Project OwlNet at the Indiana Dunes State Park.

Unfortunately, your owl will not be able to go home with you. After all, you (hopefully) don't have a few hundred mice running around in your house for your owl to eat. You will be able to keep track of your owl, however, using its band number and the notification system. Whenever your owl is caught or spotted, you will be notified of its travels. It's almost like getting a "Wish You Were Here" postcard from your owl!

Most importantly, you will show how much you care about these darling birds by helping Indiana Dunes State Park and Project OwlNet continue to study and monitor this species. We want to learn as much as we can about these tiny raptors. The more we know, the better we can protect the Saw-Whets; the better we protect them, the more likely they will be around for generations to come. So please help the owls. Adopt one today.



PROJECT OWLNET

Founded in 1994, Project OwlNet was created to assist researchers across the United States and abroad in communication, cooperation and innovation. There are currently hundreds of owl-migration researchers participating in Project OwlNet. Although Project OwlNet began with, and remains focused on, Northern Saw-Whet Owls, the member researchers study many other types of owls and there are species-specific interest groups within Project OwlNet. The three goals of Project OwlNet are:

- Support the continued expansion of a network of migrant bird banding stations.
- Advocate the use of standardized, comparable netting protocols.
- Improve communication and coordination among owl migration research stations.

To accomplish these goals, Project OwlNet provides methods for banding owls so that owl banding stations are consistent, thus making the data more usable. Project OwlNet is also seeking to provide a central location for data compiled across all of the research stations, and maps that summarize the data.



Provide consistent methods of catching and banding the owls, and provide consistent methods of recording data.



Provide the tools necessary for a variety of data entry tasks.



Provide a centralized location for the collection of data which will be accessible to researchers across the globe.