

Northern Saw-whet Owl *Aegolius acadicus*



Folk Name: Acadian Owl

Status: Winter Visitor

Abundance: Very Rare

Habitat: Stands of conifers, young pines, cedars

The Northern Saw-whet Owl is the smallest owl found in the eastern United States. At 8 inches long, it is half an inch shorter than the Eastern Screech-Owl, and it does not have the ear tufts found on the Screech-Owl. This owl has been called “so tame as to seem almost stupid,” at times letting people approach it close enough to catch it. The Saw-whet Owl gets its name from its unique call.

“The saw-whet owl does not hoot. It emits a series of evenly spaced mechanical repetitious whistles sounding like someone whetting a saw.” —*Statesville Record and Landmark*, January 8, 1972

This shy, petite owl is actually very hard to see anywhere in the Carolinas. Just to hear one, you usually have to visit a known breeding location in the mountains and then hope to track down the call on a calm, windless night. These owls are known for their ventriloquial call—that resonates throughout the woods, so it can be a real challenge to actually determine where the bird is at, even when it seems to be calling from directly ahead.

John James Audubon described the effect of their call this way: “These notes, when coming as they frequently do, from the interior of a deep forest produce a very peculiar effect on the traveler, who, not being aware of their real nature, expects as he advances on his route to be met with shelter under a sawmill at no great distance. Until I shot the bird in the act I had myself been more than once deceived in this manner.”

A small population of Northern Saw-whet Owls breed in North Carolina on our highest mountain peaks, primarily in spruce-fir forests above 4,500 feet elevation. These local breeding birds are believed to migrate to lower elevations in the mountains during the winter. Winter visitors to the Carolinas are believed to move down from breeding areas as far north as Nova Scotia.

Northern Saw-whet Owls migrate into the Carolinas each winter and roost in scattered areas of evergreens in the Foothills, Piedmont, and Coastal Plain. USGS Bird Banding Laboratory data indicate Northern Saw-whet populations periodically irrupt—moving south in larger numbers, about every four years. During migration, these birds can show up almost anywhere. President Theodore Roosevelt found a pair roosting at the White House in 1902.



The earliest confirmation of this owl in the Central Carolinas is of two specimens collected by Homer Autry in 1952. Autry was a biologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine. He was also interested in birds and had a collection of bird study skins. One Saw-whet Owl he discovered was found dead on a road in Charlotte. He collected the specimen, prepared it, and kept it in his personal collection. Autry found another Saw-whet Owl in Union County. He sent this specimen to the North Carolina State Museum where it can still be examined today. Unfortunately, the date recorded for the collection of both these owls is September 9, 1952, but that is the date of Autry’s letter to David Wray at the museum, not their actual collection date. It appears the specimen that is now in the State Museum has both an incorrect collection date and the wrong county listed—as it is listed as Anson, not Union County, as specified in Autry’s original letter.

Saw-whet Owls were reported calling multiple times during the spring at the Girl Scout Camp in Stanly County in the 1970s. One was reported on the spring count on April 27, 1974, and two were reported on the Stanly Spring Bird Count on May 15, 1976. The count compiler noted: “I hope other birders can check out these owls there, especially since 15 May is very late for this species to be lingering in the piedmont.” These reports received lots of attention and generated lots of interest, but none were confirmed. It is possible they were a simple case of mistaken identification. The observers may have been hearing the call of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, a Mourning

Dove, or some other similar-sounding bird or frog. We will never know.

A birder in Rock Hill recorded a Northern Saw-whet Owl calling on January 17, 1984 (*fide* Albert Conway).

At least nine Northern Saw-whet Owls have been injured by cars in this region. Each was admitted to the Carolina Raptor Center for treatment. These records include: Union County, NC, on November 9 1983, Gaston County on December 12, 1983, Randolph County on January 19, 1984, Cleveland County on December 4, 1990, Rutherford County on February 20, 1997, Mecklenburg County on February 24, 1998, another from there on December 9, 1999, Catawba County on February 24, 2005, and Union County, NC, on November 17, 2007.

David Wright discovered a Northern Saw-whet Owl roosting in his yard on the southern shore of Lake Norman, in Mecklenburg County on December 27, 1993. The appearance of this bird provided quite a pleasant surprise, but the bird did not linger long.

In the late 1980s, researchers discovered that banding stations using audio-lures (loop tapes of owl calls) increased capture rates up to 10 times of those at banding sites that did not play a recorded owl call. Banders in both Carolinas gave audio-lures a try with some success. In the North Carolina Coastal Plain, bander Frank Enders captured about 100 Saw-whet Owls during a record fall migration in November and December of 1995. In York County, SC, Bill Hilton Jr. captured and banded 10 at Hilton Pond: four on November 29–30, 1999; three on December 2, 5, and 8 in 1999; one on November 30, 2000; one on November 27, 2001; and one on December 15, 2007.

Our most recent record of a Northern Saw-whet Owl comes from the town of Stanley in Gaston County on December 26, 2011. The bird was recorded at 10:45 p.m. softly calling as a Great Horned Owl hooted loudly. This owl was at the home of D. Henry.