



BIRD WATCHERS'

Roundtable

So many people have asked me about how to find Saw-whet Owls that I have decided to write it all down for everyone who is interested in searching for these tiny raptors. If you have a favorite species, why not write up a similar article to share with CBC members through the Roundtable?--MBSJr.

In Quest of the Saw-whet Owl

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Of all the birds known to occur in the Carolinas, the Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) remains to this day one of our most elusive and unfamiliar species. To professional and amateur alike, this tiny owl has been one of the most perplexing and poorly understood members of the American avifauna. Following the original description of the Saw-whet by Gmelin in 1788, no less than twenty different scientific names have been given to this diminutive raptor, while the juvenile birds, whose plumage is so different from that of the adults, were regarded as a distinct species for many years. Elliott Coues, in his fascinating book *Birds of the Northwest* (1874), pointed out that even in the late 19th Century, many reputable ornithologists regarded the dark, chocolate-brown young as a separate species known as the White-fronted Owl. This famed surgeon-ornithologist put the controversy to rest, however, with his typical Couesian tongue-in-cheek remark that every nest of the Saw-whet Owl which he had examined contained young of the White-fronted Owl, possibly suggesting that the latter species might be the Cowbird of the owl family! Not surprisingly, the issue was never raised again; and the White-fronted Owl became one of the few extinct species that man destroyed with ink rather than guns.

Even today, practically nothing is known with certainty about the behavior of this secretive bird, except for its remarkable tameness. In his *Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey*, Bent mentions the ease with which the Saw-whet may be lured by a whistled imitation of its song; and he relates the humorous account of one lighting on the head of a friend who was calling the owls in Massachusetts. Brad Hawkins, former director of the Greensboro Junior Nature Museum, captured a young Saw-whet in his mist nets at Mt. Mitchell in 1965; and following its release, the bird not only showed no signs of alarm but refused to leave the area. Sitting contentedly in the

tree where it had been placed, the owl remained at the banding station and watched the activities of the ornithologists until they departed some time later! And of course, almost every birder has heard tales of people's capturing the bird with their bare hands, not to mention the innumerable comments in the literature about its unusually tame disposition.

Until recent years, ornithologists in North Carolina regarded the Saw-whet as a winter visitor only, with no evidence that the bird might be present throughout the entire year. Largely through the efforts of Arthur Stupka, who served for over 30 years as Chief Naturalist for Great Smoky Mountains National Park, it has been discovered that the Saw-whet Owl inhabits certain of the higher mountain ranges in the state throughout the spring and summer months. Although the bird occurs throughout the state during the winter, it seems to be largely a matter of luck to stumble across one during this season. Paul Sykes, for example, was predictably startled when a Saw-whet flew into his car as he sped toward the Outer Banks late one night! Unfortunately, most of us do not possess such "animal magnetism" and we must head to the high country and search out the owl ourselves; it simply will not come to us!

Finding the Saw-whet Owl during the breeding season requires the right combination of many variable factors; and even with proper effort, Lady Luck often seems determined to foil our best efforts. Nevertheless, the quest for this elusive raptor holds excitement enough to compensate for the feeling of frustration which not infrequently darkens the brow of the seasoned owl chaser. The following observations, based on years of field work, should make your search more pleasant and hopefully productive. In passing, I might urge you to report all records of the bird which you happen to find. There is still a great deal to be learned about the bird, and every observation has significance.

LOCALITIES: Saw-whet Owls are found in the forests of red spruce (*Picea rubens*) and Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*) which cover many of the higher peaks in the Great Smoky, Great Balsam, Plott Balsam, Roan, and Black Mountains. The best spot for the bird is in the Smokies, along the road from Newfound Gap to Clingman's Dome. Collin's Gap, about halfway along this route, seems to be a favorite resort for the Saw-whet; but the bird is not infrequently reported at Newfound Gap, Indian Gap, the Spruce-fir Nature Trail, and at Clingman's Dome parking lot. Outside the Smokies, the next best area is along the Blue Ridge Parkway between Asheville and Cherokee. In this region, between milepost 420 and 431.4, there are numerous records of the Saw-whet. The two best places are at the Devil's Courthouse Overlook and Haywood-Jackson Overlook near Richland Balsam. There are nature trails leading into the woods at both of these sites, and the owls are heard from the parking lots and occasionally seen along the trails. The only other area where you are likely to find the owl is at the campground in Mt. Mitchell State Park, where the bird has been heard and seen practically every summer since the late 1940s. The picnic ground at the top at Mt. Mitchell is also a good spot for Saw-whets.

SEASON: The best time to search for the Saw-whet Owl is during the two-month period from the second week of April through the second week of June, although the first two weeks of May seem to be the peak of the season. The owls' calling is pretty much confined to this period, and field work before or after this period is likely to be fruitless.

TIME OF THE DAY: The two hours preceding dawn is the best time to hear the owl, but practical considerations usually make it preferable to search during the two or three hours following sunset.

CALLING: Like all other owls, the Saw-whet is located by listening for its calls, which are quite distinctive. The most commonly heard "song" consists of a long series of resonant, monotonous cooing notes repeated at the rate of about 2 per second and often lasting for several hours. Under ideal wind conditions, these notes carry quite some

distance. Imitating the call by whistling is a very effective way to get the owls calling and often results in their approaching close enough to be observed in a flood light.

WEATHER CONDITIONS: Weather seems to have little effect on the owls' calling, but it has a tremendous effect on your ability to hear it. Winds in excess of 5 miles per hour produce such a roaring in the trees that it is almost impossible to hear the call notes. If the winds are whipping around the peaks, you might as well forget it, head back to the motel, and watch the late show!

SUGGESTED EQUIPMENT: Obviously a flashlight is indispensable if you intend to see the Saw-whet. However, with the weather being what it is on these high peaks, it is smart to take along hot tea or coffee and something to nibble on. This will not only be physically refreshing but will keep your mind and reflexes alert for the return trip down the winding mountain roads.

WARNING: In April and May the mercury plunges at night in these high altitudes, and you should come with clothing suitable for cold and occasional freezing weather. Furthermore, ice and snow often persist in sheltered areas, making car travel hazardous until late April. It doesn't hurt to inquire about road conditions before going up and to stay alert even if everyone says the roads are clear. Even during July and August, the temperature often drops into the low 40s, so come prepared. Fog is a treacherous enemy and is also one of the most characteristic features of these mountains, a fact which should be remembered at all times. If you haven't pulled out your maps by this point and discovered to your horror that these owls are found a long way from civilization, I will point out to you that you can anticipate a drive of at least 30 to 45 minutes from these high peaks to the nearest motel, gas station, or restaurant. Make sure you have plenty of gas before you leave; take something along to eat; and have your accommodations in order before taking off. One last suggestion: these spruce-fir forests are notoriously dangerous places for wandering about, and I strongly suggest that you stay on the road or overlooks. More than one seasoned hiker has disappeared forever in these woods, and such famed explorers as John Cairns and Elisha Mitchell have been killed while exploring such forests. Countless others have received painful and often serious injuries in these wet, slick, moss-covered mountains; and night makes the area even more dangerous.

POSTSCRIPT

Visualize your car parked beside the road on a high, desolate mountain, miles from the nearest town. Sunset was hours ago; the night is pitch black, cold, and forbidding. As you stumble about in the darkness, gawking at the trees, a Park Ranger or fellow tourist happens along. Almost invariably, they will stop and inquire about your present condition: "Are you sick? Has the car broken down? Do you need some help? Say, what are you doing here, anyway?!" The best answer, though painful, is an honest one. This will be followed by an awkward silence, a look of disbelief (often ill concealed), and occasionally a vague sense of apprehension on the part of the good Samaritan. Once the situation becomes clear to the inquirer, he will either gun the engine and beat a hasty retreat (fearing the worst) or else he is likely to chat amiably about the time a Screech Owl flew down his aunt's chimney. At any rate, patience and appreciation for his concern over your welfare are in order, even though he has interfered with your owl listening.

I will never forget just such an event during the early hours of one cold May morning. It was 2:30 AM and here I was standing in the Parkway on Richland Balsam listening for Saw-whet Owls. A dense, impenetrable blanket of fog covered the entire range, obliterating everything except the white line in the middle of the road, and a drenching rain fell through the near-freezing night air. I had been contentedly listening to a Saw-whet calling from the dark-shrouded peak above the road, when the dim lights of a camper bus suddenly appeared out of the blinding fog. Clad in a leather jacket and filthy blue jeans, I stood passively in the road with a Texas cowboy hat on my head and a long,

black machete in my hand. Spotting me, the driver stopped suddenly (at a safe distance), rolled down the window, and inquired in a hesitating voice:

"Now far is it to Asheville?"

"About 40 miles," I answered.

The man's wife and children were obviously uneasy about my being at this desolate spot in the middle of the night, and the driver eyed my machete nervously.

"I'm almost out of gas," he cried. "I can't make it that far. Isn't there a gas station nearby?"

"No," I replied. "You are at least 30 to 40 miles from the nearest town, and most of the stations are closed at this hour."

"But we've been on the Parkway all night. Aren't there homes or something around here?" he inquired.

"No," I answered. "I expect we are the only people for 30 miles in either direction."

This did nothing to calm his growing anxiety, so he inquired further, "Do you live nearby?"

"Ah, then you must be camping here," he said hopefully.

"Nopc," I responded, growing irritated that this cross-examination was interfering with my owl-listening.

Becoming increasingly apprehensive, the man finally mustered the courage to inquire, "Say, do you mind if I ask what you are doing up here?"

"I'm just listing for Saw-whet Owls," I replied.

"Eh, what was that again?" he cried.

"I said I'm listening for Saw-whet Owls," came the answer.

His wife, visibly agitated by this point, began shouting at her husband, who hit the gas and vanished into the dark night, leaving me in the rain. It occurred to me that she may have heard me saying something about sawing, whetting, and awling; and fearful that they had encountered an insane child-chopping, machete wielding killer, they undoubtedly were thankful to have escaped unharmed.

On such nights, when the weather is wretched, I have heard the Saw-whet Owl give a call that sounds like a laugh. I suspect they are laughing at me.