

Star-nosed Mole in the diet of Northern Saw-whet Owl

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THE DIET OF THE NORTHERN Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) has been well documented as comprising a wide variety of prey items with some variation in prey preferences exhibited both geographically and seasonally (Rasmussen et al. 2008). Deer mice (*Peromyscus* spp.) are dominant prey species throughout much of its range at all times of year, while species of shrews (*Blarina*, *Sorex*) and voles (*Microtus*, *Myodes*) may also be important prey of the saw-whet owl, the latter particularly in more boreal regions and in winter and spring (Catling 1972, Patrikeev 2007, Rasmussen et al. 2008). In a study of wintering Northern Saw-whet Owls in southern Ontario, Catling (1972) found that Meadow Vole (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) accounted for about 70% of all prey (84% by weight), while deer mice were second in importance at 26% (15% by weight). All other prey, primarily shrews, accounted for just over 4% of prey and only a fraction

of the total prey weight. This note documents an apparently unusual and perhaps novel prey item of the Northern Saw-whet Owl.

At midday on 29 January 1984, in Lynde Shores Conservation Area, Whitby, Regional Municipality of Durham, Ontario (N43° 51' 14", W78° 58' 3") the authors discovered a Northern Saw-whet Owl perched approximately 2 m above the ground on the sheltered lowermost branches of an Eastern Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) growing at the edge of Lynde Creek. Upon closer inspection, the owl was observed to be sitting on the carcass of a Star-nosed Mole (*Condylura cristata*). At around 1230h, shortly after the initial discovery, the owl was observed hunched over the mole, tearing at the tentacled nose, and later (1320h) the owl was observed asleep on the carcass, at which time it was photographed (Figures 1 and 2). Visible in Figure 1, is the broad, flat front foot

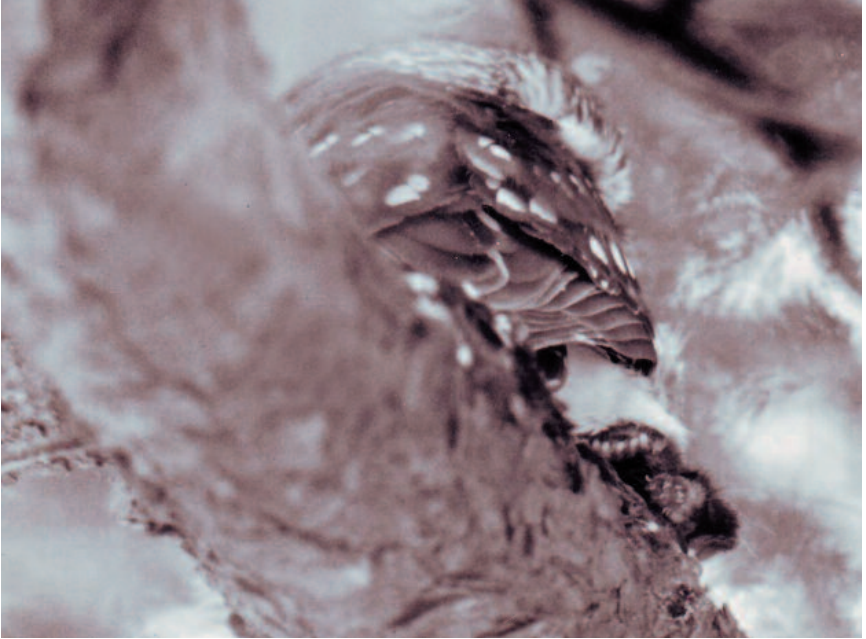


Figure 1. Northern Saw-whet Owl with Star-nosed Mole (snout and forelimb visible), 29 January 1984, Lynde Shores Conservation Area, Durham R.M. *Photo: Ron Ridout*



Figure 2. Northern Saw-whet Owl with Star-nosed Mole (large hind foot visible), 29 January 1984, Lynde Shores Conservation Area, Durham R.M. *Photo: Ron Ridout*

characteristic of moles (*Talpidae*) and the elongate snout terminating in the tentacled disc diagnostic of the genus *Condylura* (Banfield 1974).

Condylura is not among the 25 genera of small mammal prey listed for Northern Saw-whet Owl (Catling 1972, Patrikeev 2007, Rasmussen et al. 2008). It is a monotypic genus with its sole representative, the Star-nosed Mole, restricted to eastern North America where it is widespread and common, occurring throughout the eastern breeding and wintering range of the Northern Saw-whet Owl. That this mole is evidently an infrequent prey of this owl may be explained both by its larger size and fossorial habits. Its median weight (52 g; Banfield 1974) is greater than the median weights of the owl's principal prey (*Peromyscus*, *Microtus*) and all but a very few of the listed prey species. Its fossorial habits might tend to preclude depredation by aerial predators; however, burrows of the Star-nosed Mole are shallow and frequently terminate at creek banks, where individuals forage along wet banks, beneath ice shelves and in open water, swimming freely in search of aquatic invertebrates (Banfield 1974).

Acknowledgements

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