

NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL WITH MOUSE

by Alan E. Strauss

Northern Saw-whet Owls (*Aegolius acadicus*) are the smallest of all of the eastern owls. This species ranges in size from about seven to eight and a half inches and can be identified by the round tuftless head, streaked forehead, flat facial disk, yellow eyes, and black bill. Because saw-whets are nocturnal and very small, they are usually hard to find.

The one shown here, a life bird for my son and me, was seen on December 26, 1989, in the New Pines on Plum Island. Although I have been aware of the presence of saw-whets in the pines on the island for a number of years, I never knew exactly where to look. The birder searching these pines for the first time for a little owl soon becomes aware of the extent of this sea of conifers. After a few hours of fruitless scanning, one is overtaken by a feeling of hopelessness.

My son and I had been looking for about an hour and a half when we finally came upon some orange flagging that a previous birder had tied to trees to help newcomers locate the owl. However, we did not find a saw-whet adjacent to the



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December 26, 1989, Plum Island, Massachusetts

Photo by Alan E. Strauss

flagging. So we continued to look in the thick growth of pitch pines, searching both high and low. Before long, we noticed white droppings beneath some of the trees in an area adjacent to a small frozen pond. Then we spotted a few pellets on the ground, and our excitement and anticipation grew. Heads down, we looked for more and found about a half dozen pellets beneath one tree. As we proceeded up a small gully, I raised my head, and there, at eye-level, was the saw-whet owl.

The bird sat motionless on a branch only four feet up from the snow and about four feet from us and was so still, except for an occasional eyeblink, that my son questioned whether or not it was real. We watched this tiny raptor for a long time. Struck by how small it was and how tame it acted, my eleven-year-old wanted to pick the bird up but, of course, was restrained from doing so. The temptation was understandable. I have read in *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding* that these birds can be lifted from a perch and held in the hand without a struggle.

We soon noticed that the owl had a mouse in its talons. I made notes and took several photographs. Because it was fairly dark in the dense pine grove, we returned to the car to get a flash, marking the trail with pieces torn from my scarf. When we returned, the bird was still in the same spot. I took several flash photos and collected some pellets for examination at home.

The saw-whet pellets were oblong in shape, dark gray in color, and ranged in size (3.5 to 6.0 centimeters). Densely packed with fur, each contained one small rodent cranium as well as scapulae, vertebrae, tibiae, and femurs. In contrast to the larger owls, whose pellets often contain more than one type of remains, each saw-whet pellet appeared to represent a single animal meal. Some authorities suggest that these tiny owls eat mostly insects, but this particular bird was certainly enjoying a mouse. Saw-whets may prefer insects, but in the absence of this food source in winter, the evidence of the pellets I examined suggests they feed primarily on rodents.

Prior to this sighting of a saw-whet, I had looked for them in Maine, where Bill Hancock of the Maine Audubon Society told me they are fairly common in hemlock ravines. Hancock whistles them in at night and then observes them with a spotlight. Saw-whets can also be found fairly reliably in Massachusetts at the state forest on Nantucket Island. These birds may respond in February to a recording of their *too-too-too* call and, according to one birder's report, will fly directly overhead and then perch nearby.

ALAN E. STRAUSS, an archaeological consultant in Providence, Rhode Island, and the author of "Bird Finding at Sachuest Point," published in the August 1990 issue of this journal, reports that the encounter with the saw-whet was a real treat, a rare birding day that produced in all three life birds—a Varied Thrush, the Northern Saw-whet, and a Long-eared Owl.