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Night Travelers

We often think that science has already thoroughly studied and come to understand most everything about the lives of our birds and mammals. This, however, is patently not the case. What we don't know far outweighs what we know. A good case in point concerns the northern saw-whet owl. Until the early 1990's, we were not even aware that large numbers of these diminutive birds of prey migrate through the Kawarthas every fall.

In October of 1993, Tim Dyson, a local bird bander, writer, photographer and naturalist, had something of an epiphany. He knew that large numbers of saw-whet owls were being netted and banded along the lakeshore of Lake Ontario. It suddenly dawned on him that these same southward bound birds would first of all have to cross inland areas to the north before arriving at the lakeshore. It therefore made sense that catching the owls at inland sites should also be possible.

Before dark on October 5th, 1993, Dyson set up several mist nets in a stand of young red pines near his Warsaw area home. Once it was dark, he sat out in a lawn chair amidst his nets and began whistling imitations of the owl's call. Before closing up shop for the night, he had caught and banded five saw-whets and an eastern screech owl!

During the rest of October and into early November, Dyson caught a total of 53 saw-whets along with two long-eared owls, one barred owl and the aforementioned screech owl. The latter three species probably heard Tim's call imitations and thought they could catch themselves a saw-whet for dinner.

The following year, Dyson captured 103 saw-whets followed by 180 in 1995. There are now many inland saw-whet owl banding stations where population trends in this species are being monitored. The establishment of these stations is due in no small part to Tim's pioneering efforts.

Roughly the size of an overly plump European starling, the saw-whet is the smallest owl in eastern North America, measuring only eight inches (20 cm) in length. It can also be recognized by the wide, reddish-brown vertical streaks that cover the white breast. The only similar-looking owl that may turn up in the Kawarthas is the much rarer boreal owl. The key difference between the two species is beak colour - black for the saw-whet and pale yellow for the boreal.

In the breeding season from early March through May, it is sometimes possible to hear saw-whets calling at night. The call is unusual to say the least. Best described as a soft, bell-like "toot-toot-toot...", it is repeated at a frequency of roughly three notes per two seconds. The call carries well and is audible for many hundreds of metres, even in wooded areas.

In Ontario, northern saw-whet owls breed primarily in the southern portion of the Canadian Shield in the Great Lakes - St. Lawrence forest zone. Although the nests are exceedingly difficult to find, Dyson managed to locate one near Warsaw in 1994. The birds had set up home in a dead poplar, taking possession of a hole excavated by a northern flicker. From early to mid-March, the male and female could be heard calling together in an overlapping sequences of notes known as "duetting." Duetting serves to strengthen the pair bond and to advertise ownership of territory.

In the latest Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, which was carried out from 2001 through 2005, saw-whets were found to be a "possible and probable" breeder in northern Peterborough County, Haliburton and especially the Algonquin Park region.

During the day, these owls usually roost in the dense vegetation of conifers. They are especially fond of white cedars and the juniper commonly known as red cedar. Luckily for birders and photographers, saw-whets tend to remain motionless even if discovered. It would appear that evolution has taught them to trust camouflage and the dense network of branches surrounding them, even when a curious photographer is only a metre or so away!

With the arrival of winter, most saw-whets vacate their breeding grounds. Their wintering

movements, however, are still poorly understood. Some birds head to the southeastern U.S., while others appear to migrate west towards Missouri. Following Tim Dyson's lead and wanting to document the migration routes and survival rates of owls that pass through the Kawarthas during fall migration, Trent University, too, has undertaken a saw-whet owl banding project.

Under the direction of Dr. Erica Nol, banding takes place every October at Trent's James McLean Oliver Ecological Centre on Pigeon Lake near Bobcaygeon. Mist nets are set up in groups of three near small stands of red oak and white cedar. They are left open for a minimum of four hours a night, starting after dusk. A CD recording of saw-whet "toot" calls is played continuously in the hope of luring the migrating owls down from the sky. Curious by nature, the owls approach the CD player and get caught up in a net.

The nets are checked every 20 minutes, and the owls are removed by experienced banders. Details such as age, sex, weight and amount of body fat are recorded for each bird. Each new bird (i.e. not already banded) is fitted with a Canadian Wildlife Service aluminum band before release. In 2005, 95 northern saw-whets were banded at the Pigeon Lake site. As in previous years, the majority of the owls caught were female.

When saw-whet owls have migration on their mind, they certainly don't waste any time. On October 21, 2000, a saw-whet owl was banded by Trent at the Oliver Centre and released at 8:50 p.m. Exactly two and a half hours later, the same bird was recaptured 71 kilometres (as the owl flies) further south near Port Hope on Lake Ontario. If the bird flew the distance non-stop and was captured immediately, the time difference would indicate an average flight speed of 28 km/hr.

Another bird banded at the Oliver Centre was caught by Chandler Robbins, the well-known senior author of a "Field Guide to the Birds of North America", in his little woodlot in Maryland. Except for ducks, more previously-banded saw-whet owls are recaptured at different banding sites in North America than any other bird species.

Most years, a small number of saw-whets can be found overwintering on Amherst Island near Kingston. At a site known as Owl Woods, located at the east end of the island, saw-whets are routinely found roosting in white or red cedars. On winter weekends at least, there are always other birders on the island who will gladly direct you to the exact location of the Woods and the owls themselves. This is also a great place to see snowy owls and rough-legged hawks in winter.

Tim Dyson's discovery of saw-whet owl migration through the Kawarthas is an excellent example of the importance of "citizen science" whereby individuals who are not necessarily trained biologists or scientists can make extremely important contributions to our understanding of the natural world. With the millions of species present on this planet, most of which have not yet even been discovered, and only a relative handful of scientists and biologists to study and catalogue them, involvement by interested non-professionals is essential. This can start with something as simple as keeping records of the flora and fauna on your own property.

We are in a race against the clock to find and describe new species and to learn more about the behaviour and lifestyles of those species we have already named. With habitat destruction and global warming proceeding at the present rate, the almost inevitable mass extinctions of the near future may soon make it too late. We need to become much more aware of all that stands to be lost, be they mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, invertebrates, plants, fungi or the myriad types of single-celled organisms. Then maybe - just maybe - we will try to protect the habitats and species of living Nature - Creation, if you prefer - that remain.

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