

Little bird in the pines

Meet the northern saw-whet owl

By John DeBaun

Foresters Marcia Frost Vahradian and her husband, Buzz, were marking pine for another WWOA member in December 2015, and Marcia was using a basal area stick to determine density.

"I had the stick up to my eye, and was going around in a circle and counting which trees were in, and all of a sudden, an owl was looking right at me, face high," Marcia said.

It was a northern saw-whet owl, a bird known for wintering in habitats with dense cover, especially groves of conifers. It is Wisconsin's smallest owl.

Marcia's owl is featured on our cover, taken at WWOA member Merlin Becker's woods. It won first place in last year's annual WWOA photo contest.

The tiny bird, more of a migrant than a resident, is a star of sorts in Wisconsin. For 25 years, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin has offered a variety of annual field trips, and the one involving the saw-whet owl has had the most participants over the years.

Gene Jacobs, a noted expert on saw-whets, and his wife, Lorraine, have led more than 1,900 people in the saw-whet banding program at the Linwood

Springs Research Station near Stevens Point since they started the program in 2008, according to the Spring 2018 issue of the NRF magazine.

Marcia said she had never seen an owl that close before and was surprised.

"I slowly put the stick down, and took out my cell phone to take a photo," she recalled. "I was amazed at how much I could move and that owl didn't seem to care."

Jacobs said that is not surprising since the owl does not have much fear of humans. If you see the owl during the day, it is pretty easy to get within 10 feet of it without spooking it.

"A few times I have been able to get close enough to grab one with my hand," he said. Usually he has been within an arms length,

and when the owl looked away he was able to reach out and catch it. During the banding process they are usually very calm, he said.

"They don't have much fear of us," he said. "But they are very nervous when a larger owl shows up."

Marcia said her owl was more concerned with her dog.

"I tried to keep the dog away and he

never saw the owl. But the owl was incredibly patient in letting me take a picture," she said. "It was fascinating."

The saw-whet owl's diet is largely small mammals, mostly a variety of mice as well as voles, shrews and the young of larger mammals like chipmunks and squirrels. During migration they also feed on smaller birds and insects. The robin-sized owl gets its name from its shrill call, which has been likened to the sound of a spaceship or a whetstone pulled over a saw blade as it is sharpened. It is usually heard only in late winter and spring.

The main threat to saw-whet owls are larger owls such as the great-horned or barred owls, as well as some of the usual nest predators such as raccoons, weasels and martens.

For habitat, they prefer conifers, and Jacobs said they like to nest in the vast boreal forests of Canada, although some also nest in Wisconsin, probably in greater numbers the farther north they get in the state. The owl is a cavity nester, so it is somewhat restricted in where it nests. Dead trees with woodpecker holes make a good home, and putting up nest boxes as artificial cavities can help the species.

From data he has gathered over 30 years, Jacobs said the owl seems to be holding its own. The count fluctuates from year to year between about 350 to 700 owls captured for banding, but it tends to even out.

Barbara A. Schmitz contributed to this story.



Owl Fast Facts

Six of the 19 owl species found in North America regularly nest in Wisconsin. Two more, the barn owl and the great gray owl, have historically been recorded here but are quite rare. Snowy, boreal and northern hawk owls are occasional winter visitors.

The great gray owl is the tallest owl in Wisconsin and North America and has the largest wingspan, up to 60 inches.

The smallest owl is the northern saw-whet, which tips the scales (barely) at 2 to 5 ounces.

Owls' eyes are fixed in their sockets, so their whole head moves as they shift their gaze. The necks of some species can turn up to 270 degrees.

Owls' ear openings are relatively huge and often asymmetrically positioned, which means sound is slightly delayed in reaching one and thus its source can be pinpointed.

Source: Wisconsin DNR



John DeBaun and his wife, Gayle, manage their family's 47-acre 50-year tree farm in Juneau County. They are 10-year members of WWOA. He is a retired newspaper editor and writes about their farm at www.brokenoakhill.com.

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