

Northern Saw-whet Owls; The Frosting on the Cake!

By June Ficker #21419

In September 1994 Joan Junker and I attended the Association of Field Ornithologists meeting in New York. All the papers presented were on various species of owls. Northern Saw-whet Owls (NSWO) presented by David Brinker from Maryland sent my antennae into action. The Reserve's habitat blended with David's summation of NSWO's preference and Nancy McReal had given me a Saw-whet road kill which had occurred on Route 9 close to the entrance of the Rachel Carson Sanctuary. That property abuts the Wells National Research Reserve.

After consulting with Dave who said, "Go for it June," we opened six 12 meter mist nets the night of October 19, 1994. A lure, playing the sound of a Saw-whet, has been placed since its inception on a log within five feet of net #3. Between Joan, John and I, we must have removed a hundred or more leaves from the first two nets. My heart began to race as I looked over all the leaves in #3. There was something unusual about a clump near the bottom trammel. Oh, yes, not leaves, it was a Saw-whet! Wow! We managed to entice another 16 before we closed in early November that year.



There are certain factors that come into whether to open nets or not on any given night. If it's too windy--forget it. These little critters, averaging just 2.8 ounces or 80 grams, get buffeted by the wind and will not move. Naturally we do not operate in the rain. Another big issue is a full moon, as it acts as a spotlight making the owls visible to predators.

We encountered three serious fatalities in the nets within the first few years due to by Barred and Great Horned Owls. It was so upsetting I was going to stop

the project. A call to Trevor-Lloyd Evans, my mentor and trainer at Manomet, MA said: "No, you won't! Shut down the nets--no sound for three or four nights. Frequently these predators are young hatch year



Barred and Great Horned looking for a good spot to winter. Playing the tape is an open invitation for a banquet." His instructions have been successful and, by taking a break in banding, there have been no further problems with predation. We continue to follow this advice.

Since 2000, we have used weight and wing measurements to separate male and female with the probability of 95% being correct. Developed by Dave Brinker and approved by the Bird Banding Lab, they are followed by all banders involved with Project Owl Net. Typically the females are larger than the males. Charts illustrating eye color are used for aging.

We have not had a Boreal Owl at the Wells Reserve. As you may note in your field guides, this species is a bit larger as well as being irruptive, meaning they do not occur every year, but only when certain conditions exist. However, a number of years ago one was captured at the owl banding station in Freeport. Other rare species in Maine are the Northern Hawk Owl and Great Gray Owl--also irruptive. Past records have documented the latter from Gilsland Farm territory northward. The Eastern Screech Owl is another rare species. When present, it is usually found in southern or mid-Maine.

The term Foreign Recovery indicates a bird previously banded at another station. We have caught four since 1996. *(continued on next page)*