



This backyard Eastern Screech-owl was drawn close in the dark during one of our owling nights.

THIS ISSUE

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**“Saw What?”
A Special Owl
Marks Our 30th Year**

We purchased this house and the six-plus acres behind it late in 1988 then closed on December 26th of that year, so the day after Christmas this year marked our 30th here. We scheduled an “owling” night incidentally for that very evening and had promoted registration for it in our December newsletter...

I’ve been attracting wild owls with recordings for *over* thirty years now. Sometimes it has been in association with the annual Christmas Bird Count, but more often we have offered the opportunity as an educational experience through Nature Discovery. Most attempts draw nothing. In fact, wind and/or precipitation tend to severely limit chances of success. However, on a still, dry night, especially if we are able to try it at three or four separate locations, the chance of attracting an Eastern Screech-owl at one of the stops is more likely than not.

The screech-owl is usually the only species I attempt to attract with the recordings, although others may be around. In the lower part of the state (deciduous forest biome) it is, by far, the most common and most commonly responsive to a recording. Since this owl is so small (7-8”) the home range of a given pair need not be nearly as large as that of, say, a Great Horned Owl pair. In good rural habitat – scattered woodlots and open spaces – there may be a new screech-owl pair every quarter mile down a country road.

I also only try owling between late November and mid-March. Although a recorded lure could work any time of year the lack of foliage greatly enhances the chance for an unobstructed view of the bird. Secondly, I’d prefer not to unnecessarily disturb the owls during their reproductive months, spring to summer.

When an owl hears the call of its kind within its established home range it is not looking to make a new friend, but to drive the intruder from the territory. On some occasions when playing a recording an owl will dive toward the source of the sound and buzz my head. Years ago, one naturalist shared his experience of calling screech-owls with an audience in April, smack during their nesting cycle. Suddenly, the bird swooped and made contact, raking its talons across his forehead!

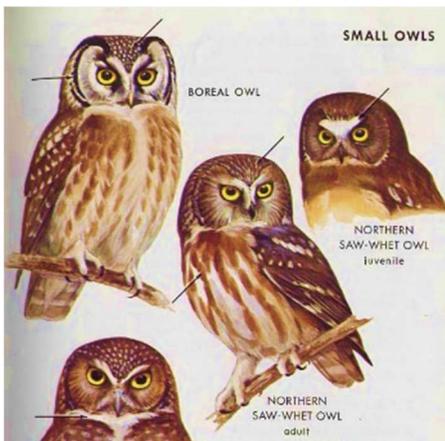
This species typically emits one of two soft vocalizations: a fairly high-pitched, but descending series of whistles like the whinny of a toy horse, or a rapid, yet peacefully-pulsating monotone, often extending for several seconds.

After participants are settled in place adjacent to a patch of low, bare branches on which the bird has the potential to alight I cue-up and play one of these recordings from the app on my cell phone. After a minute I pause the recording and the group collectively listens for a response. If there is none I repeat the procedure then stop and listen perhaps up to a half dozen times more before giving up, and trying at a new location up the road.

The soft, responding whistle of a screech-owl sounds further than the bird actually is. Our eyes, adjusted to the darkness, scan the sooty space above and behind the black, twisted claws of winter branches. I play the recording again, more briefly, then pause it. We listen. The response may now sound louder and closer. Suddenly a silhouette, swiftly and silently, apparates among the skeletal sticks above us. If we're lucky it may remain there and softly respond to the perceived intruder, but, many are too agitated by the territorial violation to sit still for long. They launch then alight one tree to another across the expanse of the yard.

Amid brief bursts of playing/pausing the recording I eventually turn the spotlight on the perched bird. Binoculars and cameras rise; whispered, laudatory comments commence. For some in attendance it is their first encounter with a wild owl.

Prior to going out to call them though, the evening starts with our original Powerpoint presentation, *Michigan Owls Up Close*. We invite participants to enjoy a hot beverage and pastry while I discuss owl adaptations for night hunting and the ten species native to the state. Necessarily, the most detailed accounts, including vocalizations, are focused on the three permanent residents in the southern half of the Lower Peninsula: the Eastern Screech-owl, the Great Horned, and the Barred Owl. The other seven species spend the breeding season in biomes to the north. The Short-eared, Long-eared, Northern Saw-whet, Boreal, Northern Hawk-owl and Great Gray occupy the coniferous forest biome or taiga which begins to transition from our familiar deciduous forest through the northern third of the L.P., then extends more northward throughout most of Canada. One more species, the Snowy, breeds throughout the tundra biome.



Saw-whet Owl, including juvenile. From Peterson Field Guide to Eastern Birds.

All routinely, but sporadically drift southward into Michigan during the nonbreeding months in search of small prey items that become harder to find back home. Away from the breeding ground they live a relatively silent existence. They wander as prey availability dictates. Therefore, they lack any designated territory to defend, and so, have little need to vocalize.

The Northern Saw-whet could be considered the coniferous biome's ecological counterpart to the screech-owl. Michigan's smallest owl, averaging only 6-7 inches, is a cavity nester like the screech-owl. The relative size of its home range is diminutive, too. Thus, it is not surprising that the saw-whet is common in appropriate breeding habitat from about Clare northward, and so, by extension, is probably the most common, if unseen, winter-drifting owl to the southern L.P.

While up north I've had a few lucky encounters with a saw-whet owl, most of which occurred at Michigan Audubon's Whitefish Point Bird Observatory where migrating owls are prevalent in spring and fall. Ornithologists on site mist-net then band them throughout these seasons.

However, my most memorable encounter occurred elsewhere in the early 2000s. While presenting, and camping over a summer weekend at Hartwick Pines State Park near Grayling I was awakened early in the morning by the frenzied, scolding calls of a volume and variety of songbirds. I grabbed my binoculars and

scrambled out of the tent to find the source of the buzz. The activity was centered in an opening around a small wild black cherry tree where the flutters and harsh vocalizations of jays, cardinals, chickadees, nuthatches and others were focused. In the center at eye-level, a hapless fledgling saw-whet owl sporting tawny breast feathers and a chocolate-brown head sat with feathers puffed. A triangle of stark white feathers centered between bright, yellow-ringed orbs extended over each brow. The few frizzy down feathers that still clung to its scalp only enhanced this newbie's completely baffled expression as to why its debut to the outside world was generating so much fuss.

Seven participants registered for our owling night on December 26. At the presentation's conclusion we stepped into the yard and were immediately thrilled by the close vocalizations of a Great Horned Owl - low, toneless hoots in the woods not far to the north. Participants listened to the pattern and remembered the word handle they had just been given to help remember the cadence: *Who's awake, meeee, tooo.*

A minute later I cued up the screech-owl recording, played it, then we stopped and listened. I had just started to play it again when a single shrill, but nasally *yap* suddenly reverberated from the row of mature spruces only forty feet to our south. Everyone turned. I stopped the recording and whispered, "What was *that?*" I quietly stated that in all my years I had never heard such a noise come out of a screech-owl. When I played the recording again a distinct, measured series of monotone whistles responded, bouncing soft-as-a-Nerf ball out of the dark spruces and into our cumulative ears. "*It's a saw-whet!*"

The small, dark silhouette fluttered through the trees in front of us then back to the spruces and out of sight. I quickly ditched the screech-owl call, cued-up the bouncy saw-whet recording and hit 'play.' The bird now whistled more distantly to the south, but quickly returned to investigate anew. We were able to spotlight it several times on fly-bys and during precious seconds of perching. The bird never sat still for long but at one point elicited gasps when it buzzed within a couple feet of our heads. It finally landed within the tangled branches of an overgrown Japanese maple next to us and settled there for over a minute - our most prolonged look with binoculars despite a bit of obstruction from branches.



Local birder/photographer, Greg Smith, found this wet saw-whet roosting in a white pine on a rainy winter day.

The surprise saw-whet was not only a lifetime 'first' for every participant. The encounter was a 'first' in our tenure as temporary stewards to this precious slice of Planet Earth, and also Species Number 145 on our 30-years-running avian property list. Apt and aptly-natural on our anniversary night.

-Jim McGrath



Catch Nature Discovery on WLNZ's Coffee Break January 4

Jim is scheduled to appear this month on Friday, January 4 at 9:45am discussing winter wildlife topics. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at lcc.edu/radio/onair/ or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at lcc.edu/tv/watch.

We'll post a Facebook reminder prior to the 6pm airing.



Compare Michigan's two toads side-by-side. The common and widespread American Toad (L) versus the much rarer and range-limited Fowler's Toad.

*Visit Our Interactive
Michigan Reptiles &
Amphibians Zoo
Sunday, January 6
Doors open from 1 to
5pm. Admission
\$5/person.*

Did you know Nature Discovery houses the state's largest zoo of Michigan-native reptiles and amphibians? Currently, this highly interactive menagerie consists of 40 combined species of snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders.

We take pride in striving to offer up-close encounters with well over 100 individuals in the zoo. Identify and feed all ten species of Michigan turtles as most swim in pools right at your feet. Feed lettuce and fruit to our large, friendly red-footed tortoise. Identify a dozen species of Michigan frogs while feeding them worms and crickets. Identify and feed our six species of secretive salamanders. Identify, and even handle any of our nine species of Michigan snakes. You can even "wear" Michigan's largest, the state-listed black rat snake. We'll also feed worms, tadpoles and even mice to some of the snakes. Phot ops, galore, and so much more!

Knowledgeable staff is on hand to help participants of all ages make the most of their visit.



Michigan's two less common garter snake species, the Butler's Garter (L) and the Northern Ribbon Snake. Note the prominent white chin.

LCC Saturday GATE Youth Classes...



will be taught by Carol starting next month at East Campus. The classes run for four weeks, Saturday, February 16 through Saturday, March 9. A recommendation form from a teacher is required.

Michigan Wildlife Adventures for students in grades 2-4; 9am to 12pm.

Advanced Science Experiments for students in grades 4-6; 1 to 4pm.

For more information or to register please visit www.lcc.edu/seriousfun and select Spring GATE.



Thank you...

***to Judy & Allen Marr,
and Jon Kazsuk
for their generous
year-end donations
to Nature Discovery!***

***Resolution:
Treat Climate Change as
the Planetary Crisis it is
and Act Accordingly...
Starting Today!***

What's right with this picture? We're using the outside elements in lieu of fossil fuels to dry our clothes. What's wrong with this picture? It was taken on December 28th!



Scientists have unequivocally identified the source – fossil fuel emissions - and even given guidelines for what each of us must do, and *fast* if there is any hope of slowing the dire consequences of atmospheric warming. It starts with not only rejecting the denial-rhetoric, but ostracizing all who persist in shoveling it... starting at the top.

The latest International Panel on Climate Change report is 33 pages long, but for anyone who refuses to keep their head in the sand here is a convenient distillation of the report by *BBC News* to help all of us understand the gravity of the situation and to take personal responsibility to slow the trend:

Five Things We Have Learned From the IPCC Report

<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-45784892>

The column is loaded with other worthwhile links, like *What is Climate Change?* Understanding the physical process of the “greenhouse effect” is the basis by which we can begin to become less malleable to the arguments of those who seek to cast doubt on the science. Our children’s academic curricula need to change with the demands of the time. For their own good climate change study, starting with these elements, must be given a core standing at all grade levels.

One link asks: *Would You Give Up Beef to Help the Planet?* Turns out, it is the single most impactful action any of us can take to shrink our personal carbon footprint:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/science-environment-45792942/climate-change-what-would-you-be-prepared-to-do>

Carol has led a vegetarian lifestyle for forty years, and, although I've never labeled myself as such, my personal meat consumption - especially beef - has declined dramatically through my adult years. As of 2019 beef is officially, completely, and literally off the table at 5900. I found the 'no beef' symbol below on clipart.com. In order to remind and encourage readers on a continuing basis this symbol will henceforth become a regular fixture next to the UCS and 350.org logos at the bottom of each newsletter.

Here's to a personally and planetarily healthier 2019!

-JM



**Union of
Concerned Scientists**
Science for a healthy planet and safer world

350.org

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