

# NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL

(*Aegolius acadicus*)

## Guidance for Conservation

*The Northern Saw-whet Owl is a rare breeding and wintering resident of forested areas in the Hudson River Valley.*

### Conservation Status

The Northern Saw-whet Owl is an uncommon, but increasing breeder throughout New York. It is regarded by Partners in Flight as a Species of Regional Concern in Bird Conservation Region (BCR) 28 and as a Species of Regional Stewardship in BCR 14. NY Breeding Bird Atlas data indicate an expanding range in the Hudson River Valley.

### Identification

This is a small owl with a short body and tail, and a large rounded head. It has a whitish facial disc, yellow eyes, and a dark bill. Its back is brown with some white spots and its chest and belly have reddish-brown streaks. The legs, feet, and toes are pale and covered with feathers. It vocalizes during the breeding season, usually between March and May, and is silent for the rest of the year. The primary courtship call is a monotonous, short, whistled note, which may last for several hours without a break.



### Habitat

It inhabits moist coniferous or mixed forests as well as alder thickets, northern white cedar swamps, and tamarack bogs. It breeds mainly in forests with deciduous trees and takes advantage of cavities that woodpeckers have created. When not breeding, it can be found in dense second growth, brushy and scrub areas, and open buildings. It often roosts in dense evergreens in winter at various heights usually close to the trunk.

### Food

This bird preys on small mammals, primarily deer mice, which it hunts mainly at dusk and dawn. It most often uses the "sit and wait" tactic to drop down on prey on the ground from low hunting perches, although it will also move through wooded areas and hunt in heavy shrub cover. When prey is plentiful, a Saw-whet Owl will take as many as 6 mice in rapid succession, without consuming any of them. The excess food is cached in safe places and, in winter, is thawed out later by "brooding" the frozen carcass.

### Nesting

It nests in old woodpecker cavities, primarily those made by Pileated Woodpeckers or Northern Flickers, or in natural cavities. They will also take to nest boxes. Eggs are laid directly on wood chips or other debris. Nest trees are often dead and nest heights average 3-20 feet above ground. Nesting occurs between March and July. Nesting duties are strictly divided: males provide almost all of the food for the female and young while females incubate the eggs and brood the young.

### Threats

- Removal of nesting snags.
- Reduction of prey base due to use of pesticides.
- Logging can also remove habitat.

### Management Recommendations

- Maintain undisturbed/undeveloped mature hardwood forests with large trees for nesting or roosting.
- Leave dead or downed woody materials in forests.
- Develop/and maintain woodlots in rural and residential areas for the benefit of birds.
- Install nest boxes, which can mitigate the loss of nesting snags.

**Adapted from Rasmussen et al. 2008.**

### For additional information, see the following references:

Illinois Natural History Survey. Illinois Birds: Northern Saw-whet Owl.  
<http://www.inhs.uiuc.edu/chf/pub/ifwis/birds/northern-saw-whet-owl.html>.

Johnson, A. S., and S. H. Anderson. 2003. Conservation Assessment for the Northern Saw-whet Owl in the Black Hills National Forest, South Dakota and Wyoming.  
[http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/blackhills/projects/planning/assessments/northern\\_saw\\_whet\\_owl.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/blackhills/projects/planning/assessments/northern_saw_whet_owl.pdf).

NatureServe. 2008. NatureServe Explorer: an Online Encyclopedia of Life [web application]. Version 7.0. NatureServe, Arlington, VA. <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>.

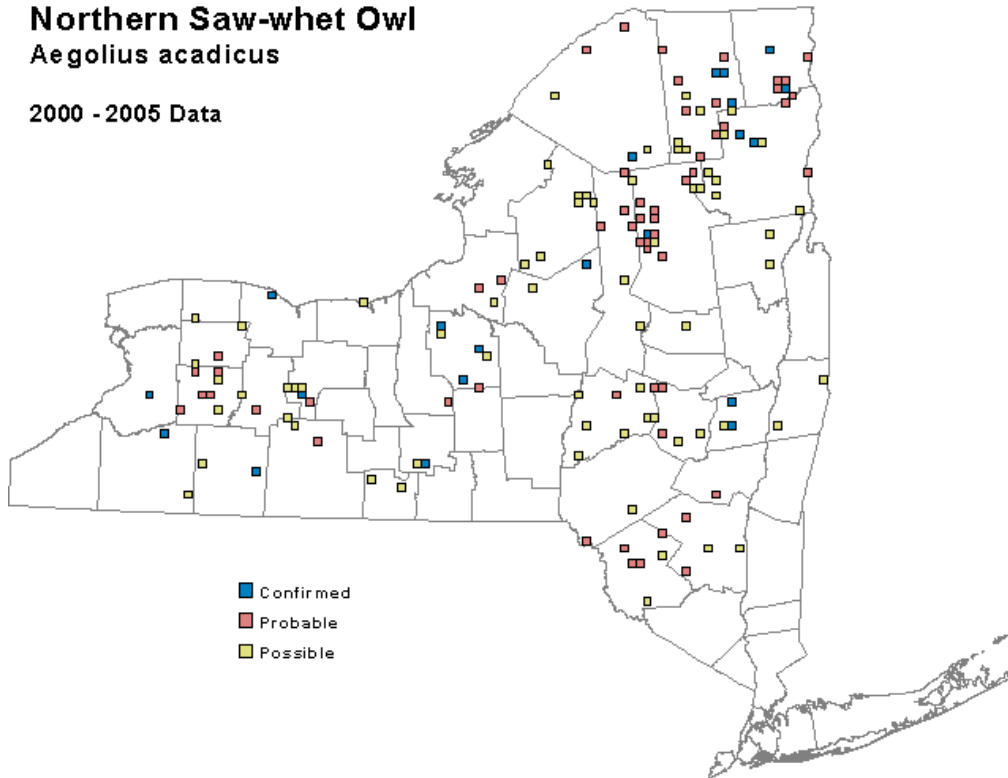
Rasmussen, J. L., S. Sealy and R. J. Cannings. 2008. Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online:

<http://bna.birds.cornell.edu.bnaproxy.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/042>

## NYS BREEDING BIRD ATLAS COMPARATIVE DATA

### Northern Saw-whet Owl *Aegolius acadicus*

2000 - 2005 Data



### Northern Saw-whet Owl *Aegolius acadicus*

1980 - 1985 Data

