

“Finding Owls” Field Workshop—Final Report
February 20, 2016
Jay Sheppard, leader

Weather was about perfect for this time of year. Lightly cloudy in early AM turned to heavy overcast until mid-afternoon when the sky totally cleared. Temperature at dawn was in the high 40s and peaked in mid-afternoon near 60°. Wind was out of the SW and W gusting to perhaps 15 mph. Moon rise was about 4 PM, sunset at 5:50. Some snow was present on portions of the trails and in the parking lot.

Because of the high numbers of pre-registrants, the day was divided into two sessions: 9:30 AM and 1:30 PM. Forty-two pre-registered; 18 attended the morning session and 38 attended the afternoon session; four attended both sessions, incl. me. Thirteen came to the afternoon session without pre-registering (they did not receive the advanced emailed handouts that went out to those who did pre-register). Several who had pre-registered did not attend. The handouts had included a key to owl pellets in the mid-Atlantic region, how to find owls, and an illustrated guide to what Saw-whets look like hiding in the foliage of the pines.

Both sessions started with a general discussion of owl roosting and feeding requirements, which was the main emphasis of the handouts and the whole workshop. Also discussed was differences in some of the rodents that owls (and other raptors) feed upon. Saw-whet pellets were passed around, including some of the skull fragments found within several of the pellets. Vole runways were exposed, as the groups walked towards the pines. We proceeded into the pines with the novices following around several of the experienced ‘owlers’ who volunteered to help. Within minutes of entering pines everyone was finding pellets and whitewash. I was very impressed with how quickly most of the participants learned what we were looking for and found the evidence.

It had been about 30 days since I last surveyed the pines for owls. I spent a lot of my time running from one voice calling “pellets” to the next to both ID the findings and then flag the spot. I think I personally only found about two such places, as I was spending so much time moving from one spot to the next with so many unmarked pellets being found. In sum, I do not think we had enough evidence of more than one bird being present. A total of perhaps 30 Saw-whet pellets were found. If two owls were present, I think we would have easily found 45 or more.

We did find a roost of a Barred Owl with two pellets in the middle of the white pines we were searching. A single roost of a Long-eared Owl was discovered with a very fresh pellet no more than a couple of days old. No other evidence of these other two species was found, although some of the pines were never searched.

At about 11:45 AM as the first session was winding up, Marcy Stutzman thought she had some interesting whitewash (later determined to be songbird!). She looked around and found a pellet. Anthony VanSchoor was nearby and looked up to see a Saw-whet perched in the thickest part of the ‘double’ pine: between the twin trunks and perhaps 40 feet up in the tree. The pellet that Marcy found under the tree was perhaps a week or more old. So this owl had returned to a roost used more than a week or two ago. It turned out that there was only a single tiny area of perhaps 10' × 12' that

the owl could be seen in most of its entirety; even then, it was not the best view of a Saw-whet. Anywhere else around that tree the bird was virtually impossible to be seen. Anthony was totally fortunate in being within that small area when he first looked up into the tree—otherwise, we would have almost certainly missed the owl. There was no whitewash under the tree. Presumably it was being stopped from reaching the ground because of the fork in the tree that was under the bird's roosting point. One could send a group of unknowing observers into the woods and even after finding the correct tree, it is likely that the owl could have escaped their attention.VERY WELL HIDDEN—and typical of this particular bird!

I would name this particular Saw-whet “Hopscotch”! The most pellets we have found under any one roost location this winter has been five! And those might be the result of two or more separate roosting periods of two or three days each. Most sites only had one or two pellets. Several had three. The maximum distance between roost sites is on the order of several hundred yards. There were several probable roost sites that had no pellets and isolated pellets were found without any whitewash: the conclusion being that the bird sometimes left the roost at dark before regurgitating the pellet!

The afternoon session's participants kept me very busy, as we worked a small section of the white pines that had not been covered in the morning session. Another dozen or more pellets were located before we descended upon the actual bird. I was hoping that we might find the Long-ear that had been present a few days before, but no such luck. We also played recordings of the Northern Saw-whet Owl while watching the bird up in the pine. It clearly was most interested, as it turned around and peered down at the source of the calling. Several times, I thought the bird was about to fly down closer to investigate, but it did not. Other than that, the bird was sleeping for the most part and was not at all perturbed by the mob of birders packed under it!

The abilities of most of the participants to quickly learn how to spot the small pellets and small drops or splatters of whitewash was most encouraging and rewarding. As a result, I think we had a very successful day. I can only hope that some of these folks will start reporting more owls in the areas they frequent.

Other birds of note: While the afternoon group was looking at the Saw-whet, we heard a Barred Owl calling in the distance. After many of the afternoon group had departed, about a dozen of us tried to find the Barred Owls to no avail. The pair has usually been roosting in the hybrid pines located between the main parking area and the road. We did not hear or see the ravens. They have been fairly regular at this location this winter.

Supplemental trip for woodcock: Nine of the afternoon participants rejoined at 5:45 on Hipsley Mill Road. We were in place in the middle of the old fields to the west of the road by shortly after 6:00. At 6:09 the first male woodcock arrived and landed only some 30' from us in the open. The ample remaining daylight allowed all of us to easily see the bird's markings as it called repeatedly from the short grasses. After just a minute or so it took flight and the rest of the next 20–30 minutes was filled with at least three males calling, chasing each other, and displaying both from the ground and high above us. Presumably the first male returned to the trails close to us where could easily watch him in the fading light. Two days later Kurt Schwarz made a video of this male:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/63381646@N02/25204406645/in/photostream/>

The crowning event of the whole day was at 6:29 when a male Saw-whet started calling from the woods at the far west end of the old fields. He did not stop for 10 full minutes! This location is approx. 1050–1100 yards south of the pines where we had found the owl perched high in a white pine earlier in the day. As there was this large distance and the bird started calling just as the last of the fading light was lost to the west, I can conclude that there were two Saw-whets present. The bird would have to have flown that distance immediately after leaving its roost in that white pine. Further, from the sizes of the pellets we have found this winter, I am of the opinion that the bird near the horse trailer parking lot is a female. [Post trip report: Howard Patterson & I visited the area on Monday afternoon where this second owl was calling Saturday night. We found pellets but no owl in some Virginia pine.]

Final comment: Some may be concerned about disturbing the owls. I have been observing these little owls (as well all the other species) for over 60 years now. Even with 30+ people standing and talking loudly under it, the bird barely looked at us until we played some tapes and made some ‘squeaking’ noises. These pines are so tall that even Long-ears are likely to remain tight to their perch unless a large group of people surrounded it. The real problem here is simply finding the tiny needle in this large hay stack of pine needles. There are 100 acres or so of pines at Annapolis Rock. Unless someone tried to climb up the pine to the bird, which would be difficult, the owls are quite safe and will remain undisturbed. One can broadcast this location to as many as possible and other than someone getting stuck in the mud of the parking lot, nothing much else will happen, at least not to the Saw-whets.

Future owl walks: Assuming all goes well, I expect to try to do this again a year from now. The biggest change is that I need to require a pre-registration system. Between parking and simply discussing various aspects of finding owls with a large group of attentive adults, it is still not enjoyable to some of those attending when there is a near mob rumbling through the pines. Everyone seemed to enjoy the comradery and working with the group towards a common goal—find an owl. I am simply concerned that this may become a true mob with few enjoying the day. I could not have managed this event without the help of Marcy and Anthony, as well as the other experienced birders. Without their assistance I would have been overwhelmed with hundreds and hundreds of questions.

Assistant Leaders (* both sessions): David Cummings, Kurt Schwarz, Jo Solem, Chuck Stirrat, *Marcy Stutzman, and *Anthony VanSchoor.

Attendees: (alphabetical order; some spouses’ names not known. #-provided photos) #Patti Armistead + husband, Susan Bishop, Mary Lou Clark, Marion Clement, Dennis Coskren, Wendy Dickey, Rae & Woody DuBois, #Dave Fleischmann, Rick Hamilton, Judy Hanft + husband, Jenny Hawes + 1, Russell Hillsley, Albert & Gail Holm, Kathie Kane, #Randy Kimmett, #Clayton Koonce, Karl Krueger, Brent Kruse, Kathie Lillie, Janet Lydon, Mary Maxey, Nancy McAllister, Terri McClellan, Joseph Muhlhauden, Mary Prowell, Gene Ricks, Amy Roberts, Madeleine Rubenstein, Russ Ruffing, David Sandler, Valerie Seger, Carroll Smith, #Debra Swing, Debbie & Lou Taylor, Tim Thompson, Robin Todd, Duane Tucker, #Wen Lin + wife, and #Joan Willoughby.

Photo album below, then follows Marcy Stutzman’s eBird list for the whole day.







eBird list for the day:

Patuxent River SP--Annapolis Rock Rd, Howard, Maryland, US

Feb 20, 2016 9:30 AM - 6:45 PM

Protocol: Traveling

1.0 mile(s)

Comments: How to find an Owl field trip led by Jay Sheppard. Conditions: Skies were clear, temperatures reached into the low 60's, light winds. This was a full day event. Two teaching sessions with one starting at 9:30 AM and the other at 1:30 PM. We stayed for woodcocks, met at 5:45 PM and watched and listened thru about 6:45 PM. The moon played an important part: Moonrise 4:07 PM, Sunset 5:52 PM, End civil twilight 6:19 PM, Phase of the Moon: Waxing Gibbous with 96% of the Moon's visible disk illuminated. The moon was so bright that the woodcock were active for about 1/2 hour. The highlight of the evening was when a Saw-whet Owl starting calling. We now have another place to search! Over 50 people participated in the two classes and everyone got the chance to see a Saw-whet Owl. This bird list is a compilation for the day and all the birds seen in this area, including the feeders behind the DNR office and the Hipsley Mill fields. There were breaks for lunch and dinner (not continuous birding).

22 species

Black Vulture 4

Turkey Vulture 2

American Woodcock 3

Mourning Dove 6

Barred Owl 1

Northern Saw-whet Owl 2 One found during the day and many photos taken. This one is by Anthony VanSchoor, the man with the eyes, who spotted this little darling tucked away high up in a pine tree. One heard from the hotspot "Patuxent River SP--Hipsley Mill Rd. (Howard Co.)" after sunset as it called for about 10 minutes.

Red-bellied Woodpecker 3

Downy Woodpecker 3

Hairy Woodpecker 1

Pileated Woodpecker 2

American Crow 6

Carolina Chickadee 8

Tufted Titmouse 5

White-breasted Nuthatch 2

Golden-crowned Kinglet 4

Hermit Thrush 4

White-throated Sparrow 4

Song Sparrow 4

Northern Cardinal 2

House Finch 2

Purple Finch 1

American Goldfinch 4