

“Finding Owls” Field Workshop—Final Report
February 23, 2019
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The weather was in the high 30s with a heavy overcast. Rain was expected in late afternoon into the evening. Not the most ideal weather, but acceptable. The parking lot was its usual muddy mess from the rains and snows of the past weeks.

The morning group started at 9:30 AM and the afternoon session started at 1:00 PM. (Next year we will start the morning 30 minutes earlier and the afternoon 30 minutes later. Gives more time for morning group and time for lunch for the leaders.) Forty-one pre-registered; 19 attended the morning session and 22 attended the afternoon session. 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 pines, along with directions to the Annapolis Rock horse trailer parking lot in Patuxent River State Park.

Both sessions started with a general discussion of owl roosting and feeding requirements, which were part of the main emphasis of the handouts and the whole workshop. Also discussed were the ecological 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 through the pines. We proceeded into the pines. Within minutes of entering pines almost everyone was finding pellets and whitewash. I was very impressed with how quickly most of the participants learned what we were looking for and finding the evidence of an owl having been present—the primary lesson for the whole day!

The morning group found over a dozen pellets, but no owl. We played the *tooting* call of the owl at one point but got no response. Some pellets were clearly only a few days old. Everyone got to see the whitewash and pellets *in situ* so they were more focused upon what we were looking for. We found droppings of turkey songbird, deer and other critters, as well as lots of white mold that looked like owl droppings! We finished about 12:30 with no owls seen or heard. RATS!

The same procedure was followed in the afternoon. We covered the same general white pines as the morning group =but with a slightly different overlap. Clearly an owl was present, but it was going to take more scrutiny to find it in those big pines. After getting to the far end of the pines a smaller group of a half dozen birders worked the downslope side of the main East-West trail through the white pines, while the rest of the group worked the adjacent side of that trail on its north side while heading west or back towards the parking area. It was now about 3:30. Many additional pellets were found in this pass of the pines.

We had barely covered a hundred yards of pines when Kristin (Gressitt) Trouton whispered in a low voice...“I think I found an owl!” Marcy was only a few feet away and close enough to hear the whisper. Marcy looked up and verified Kristin’s find! Within a minute or so everyone was clustered around the pine on the slope below the trail. The sawwhet was up about 40 feet and in a tangle of branches that made it hard to get a really clear view of it from any angle. Eventually, everyone got a satisfactory look and some documentary photos were also taken. Kristin got hugs and thanks from everyone, I think! The pine the owl was in had only a small amount of whitewash splatter and no pellets. I estimate that it was less than 200 feet from where we had

played the recording that morning. Further it likely was passed by one of the morning crew members on the uphill side. The whitewash was on the downhill side of the tree. So close!

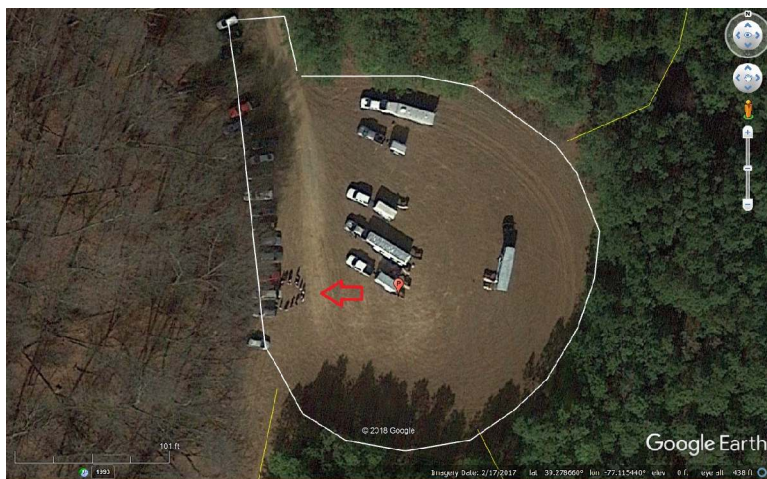
We found no other owls of any species that day. Usually we hear a Barred Owl during the day. The pines were relatively dead of any bird life! My eBird list was very depauperate!

Turkey Vulture 1
Northern Saw-whet Owl 1
Hairy Woodpecker 1
Blue Jay 1
Common Raven 1
American Crow 3
Hermit Thrush 1

We made no attempt to chase woodcocks later that evening with the pending predictions of rain. We departed the area about 4:30 PM.

Attendees (no names for a few spouses): Andrea & Meir Bank, Michael Cavigelli, Cathy Czajkowski, Cameron Darnell, Linda Davis, Basco Eszeki, Sean Fischer, Ross & Patricia Geredien, Alan Green, Cheryl Hogue, Doug Inkley, Robert Kennedy, Judy Longerbeam, Anne Looker, Nicole Mooney, Bev & Dave Ousley, Jean Palanuwech + husband + 2 kids , Tim/Lucille Paulus, Pam Perna, Shreenidhi Prabhakaran, Christian Rivas, Jacqui & Tim Seiple, Subhashini Siva, Cathy Staropoli, Manoli Strecker, Nathan Tea, Stella Tea, Kristin Trouton & husband, Ken Walsh, Laura Wolf, Ariel Zane, and Dave Ziolkowski.

Assistant: Marcy Stutzman



LEFT: Photo of N. Saw-whet Owl by Laura Wolf, 23 Feb 2019, Patuxent River St. Park, Howard Co., MD. RIGHT: Google Earth image of parking lot taken when the afternoon owling group (arrow) was assembled on Feb. 17, 2017. Check it out on Google Earth! Big Brother is watching us—but they still cannot tell us where the owls are! [Ignore the various lines on this image.]



Kristin (Gressitt) Trouton with the flagging placed on the tree with the Northern Saw-whet Owl that she discovered on February 23, 2019, in Patuxent River State Park, Howard Co., MD. The marks on the flagging read "NSWO 2-23-19". The small bits of whitewash she found are located between her feet and the trunk of the closest tree. I have reports that this tree was checked the following day (Feb. 24) and the owl, as expected, was not in this tree.

For whatever reason, most of the saw-whets spend only one day in each roost more than half the time they are here. Perhaps 25–30% spend two days; only about 10% spend three days at the same roost. Of the more than 100 owls found in these pine plantations over the past 30 winters, only three or four spent a week or more at the same roost. One spent over 2 months at the same perch each day—the true exception to this pattern of roost selection by this owl at this location. So the odds of finding an owl after the day of discovery drops dramatically afterward.

February 24, 2019