

“How to Find Owls” Workshop March 1, 2026
Trip Report
Jay Sheppard, Leader

The weather was finally acceptable for our workshop, being in the 40s with clear skies and light winds. The previous two Sundays had weather conditions that were not conducive for such outdoor activities. To ensure safe parking, we utilized the paved driveway and parking spaces of the DNR offices located a short distance west of the State Park’s horse trailer parking lot on Annapolis Rock Road. We had 24 cars for the first session and 21 for the second.

Registrants were provided with handouts in advance of this class. One file had directions to the site and other information. A second was more detailed notes on finding owls in the winter. The third was a key to pellet identification for eastern US owls. We had 30 preregistered for the morning session and 29 for the afternoon. I had four assistants for each session (see below). Jon Boone and I had done a scouting trip on the afternoon of February 25 to Annapolis Rock pines. We wanted to see if we could elicit any response from the NSWOW that has been regularly heard at night by numerous birders in the past month or so. A limited response was not heard until the time of sunset, but that was enough to give us a general location of where it was roosting. That area would give us a specific area to search for an owl on March 1.

Each session began with a 20–30-minute discussion on the various factors to consider when looking for wintering owls: prey availability, roosting cover, and searching for pellets and excrement (“whitewash”). A sample of various owls’ pellets was passed around. Afterwards, the whole group moved the pine stands, lined up, and proceeded into the pines—all searching for pellets and whitewash. We proceeded into the pines. Within 10 minutes of entering almost everyone was finding pellets and whitewash. I was very impressed with how quickly most of the participants learned from what we were looking. Finding the evidence of an owl having been present was a great educational experience, the primary lesson for the whole day! The morning group discovered the decapitated body of a deer or white-footed mouse (*Peromyscus* sp.); this was further evidence that a saw-whet was in that section of pine woods, as this had been cached up in the tops of the pines as a food reserves for the owl only a few days earlier. (see photo)

I am positive we were within sight of the owl, just not our sight. The pines are now about 30-40 years old. They are at least 80’ tall and their foliage is only in their top 10-15’. Even in good flight years when there might be a half dozen present, they would still be scattered over the 70-90 acres of pines in this part of the state park. A group of 30 observers can only thoroughly search maybe several acres per hour. So, in some 120 manhours spent in the pines on March 1, we might have adequately searched 10 acres, more likely only 7 or 8 or ~10% of the pines.

The morning group found perhaps 15-25 pellets, the same number found by the afternoon group in an adjacent search area, but no owl. We played the *tooting* call of the owl as well as the mobbing audio at several points but got no response from the owl. 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, fox, Barred Owl, probable Accipiter, and other critters, as well as lots of white mold that looked like owl droppings! We finished about 12:00 for the morning group and ~3:45 for the second group with no Saw-whet Owls seen or heard--GRRRR!

All attendees received a “Certificate of Completion” of this workshop.

The eBird report for the morning class is at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S305169125>.

The afternoon session’s report is at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S305168161>.

I note that three birders spent 2 hours after sunset that same day and only heard Barred Owls. I do not know if they used playback audio or where they searched.

I must thank my teaching assistants who helped manage the parking, trip registration, and then working with the participants as we swept through the pines searching for owl signs. They were:

Anthony Vanschoor

Ann Fineran

Jon Boone

Mary Lou Clark

Nathaniel Kuhn

Attendees AM session: Drew Bantlin, Melanie Brisse, Supratik Chaudhuri, Meredith Collack, Hartmut Doebel, Brian Doyle, Abby Elgie, Megan Evans, Dianna Garvis, Michelle Herrmann, Amy Hopkins-Lopez, Michael Kendrick, Anastasiya Kochergina, Emily Larkin, Tim Mangus, Chris Mansolf, Kevin Mitchell, Lesley Mitchell, David Moulton, Kathleen Reitz, Marvin Reitz, Michael Riley Place, Tracey Sanders, Bruce Schwartzman, Kathryn Seaman, Amelia Seiple, Fiona Seiple, Jaqui Seiple, Tim Seiple, Nalayini Sivaraman, Sara Tyler, Jayden Ward, Arielle Welch, Heather Westing, and Emily Winfield.

Attendees PM session: Jeff Baron, Lauren Carey, Emily Conrad, David DiRoma, Guy DiRoma, Julia Eddy, Heather Ettus, Matthew Evans, Lynette Fullerton, Scott Garrison, Sahar Giovacchini, Saverio Giovacchini, Mike Kilberg, Dani Moore, Douglas Moore, Sharon Moore, David Mozurkewich, Barbara Mueller, Lynn Mueller, Nathan Pressler, Cameron Rigaux, Pamela Rigaux, Linda Roberts, Sarah Schwartz, Wade Stephen, Kerry Stone, Danny Tang, Ariel Trahan, and Kristin Zimmer.,