

THE 1965 SAW-WHET OWL INVASION

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I was quite amazed to find three Saw-whet Owls in my mist-nets on a pre-dawn net check on October 3, 1965 at Tobay Wildlife Sanctuary. This, I thought, was the earliest local record for this species. It was, therefore, startling to hear of two earlier Long Island records, one on September 28.

Two weeks later on October 17 a similar net check revealed six Saw-whet Owls. On this same date nine others were netted on Long Island at two other banding stations. Subsequent inquiries indicated that this invasion was not confined to Long Island. A banding station at Kent Point, Maryland netted 29 Saw-whets during the night of October 16-17 and a station at Toronto Island, Ontario set the "world record" when they netted 44 owls on the night of October 13-14. *Audubon Field Notes* (Vol. 20, No. 1) mentions one recorded on October 31 in northern Florida, the first for this state.

During the height of the Saw-whet invasion in October and November, daily banding operations on Long Island failed to produce a single "repeat," a bird which lingered a day or more. This would suggest a rapid migration, unlike landbirds which often linger along the coast for several days after their arrival. By the beginning of December it was noticed that many Saw-whets had found winter territories and could be found from day to day in their same roosting spots.

Marine Region Migration

A total of 91 reports were received from September 28 to November 30. The three Long Island banding stations which left their nets up at night caught 57 Saw-whet Owls, with no fatalities. Their totals were as follows: Huntington (Dr. W. Lanyon), 12, October 10-31; Tobay Wildlife Sanctuary (T. Davis, F. Schaeffer), 14, October 3-31; Atlantic Beach (R. Cohen), 31, September 30-November 30. Whether the owls were netted while migrating or while hunting is not clear; one netted at Huntington had a White-footed Mouse clutched in its talons.

John Bull's *Birds of the New York Area* (1964) mentions October 10 as the extreme arrival date for this species. A September 22, 1961 record at Peekskill, N.Y. is labeled "casual." His highest recent maximum is eight (a mid-winter count) although he mentions 17 shot at Princeton, N.J. on December 10-11, 1878.

Early Records: one found dead Sept 28, Jones Beach (fide John Bull); one netted at Atlantic Beach Sept 30; three netted at Tobay Oct 3; one found dead Oct 3, Tobay (fide L. Epstein); Central Park Oct 3 (R. Sischel); one netted at Atlantic Beach Oct 6; Pelham Bay Park Oct 9 (R. Cooper).

October Maxima: peak Oct 17 (15)—six netted at Tobay, six netted at Atlantic Beach, three netted at Huntington; Oct 24 (six)—one netted at Tobay, three netted at Atlantic Beach, two netted at Huntington; Oct 30 (six)—one netted at Atlantic Beach, one netted at Huntington, one found dead near Tobay (P. Doyle), three at Pelham Bay Park (R. Sutton); Oct 31 (six)—one netted at Tobay, five netted at Huntington.

November Maxima: Nov 4 (seven)—four netted and one seen at Atlantic Beach, one found dead at Cutchogue (fide D. Puleston), one at Bronx Botanical Gardens (S. Stepinoff); Nov 10 (five)—four netted at Atlantic Beach, one found dead at Far Rockaway (fide J. Bull); Nov 27 (six)—four captured and banded at Cedar Beach (T. Davis et al), one at Rye (S. Stepinoff), one at JBWR (E. Thompson).

Of the 91 reports received two were in September, 56 in October (two found dead, ten observations, 44 netted) and 33 in November (four found dead, 17 observations, 12 netted). The most unusual record was that of an individual which flew into a large open Pan American hangar at Kennedy Airport and roosted in an open tractor engine!

Migration Elsewhere

From Eastern Canada south thru New England to the Middle Atlantic States banders and birdwatchers commented on the abundance of Saw-whet Owls. At Toronto Island, Ontario Charles Hopkins mist-netted 123 of these owls; his usual fall season total there is "40 to 50." All told, nearly 400 Saw-whets were recorded at the above areas from September to early December.

The earliest migrant Saw-whet appeared at Monomoy, Mass. on Sept 8 (J. Baird) and another there on Sept 18 (W. Bailey). Other early records from localities where Saw-whets do not breed include singles netted at Block Island, R.I. on Sept 20, 22 and 24 (E. Dickerson) and at Island Beach, N.J. on Sept 20 and 22 (fide M. Warburton).

By October 3 the Saw-whets had begun to appear nearly everywhere. At the Toronto Island banding station 34 were netted Oct 3-7. No owls were caught there during the following week of unsettled weather but on Oct 14 they netted 44 Saw-whets. On Oct 17 the east coast recorded its maximum numbers: 15 netted on Long Island; 29 netted at Kent Point, Queen Anne's Co., Md. (D. Bridge); and nine other sight and banding records from Mass., N.J., W.Va. and Md. No banding took place at Toronto Island this day. The flow continued throughout the latter half of the month—at Toronto they netted 18 owls Oct 18-23 and 15, Oct 25-29. Further south at Island Beach, N.J. they netted 16, Oct 24-31. Also see the Long island records above.



Photograph by Thomas H. Davis

Saw-Whet Owls mist-netted at Tobay, October 3, 1965

November's colder weather curtailed mist-netting operations and consequently few Saw-whets were reported. However, it was apparent that by mid-November little movement was taking place. Richard Cohen's daily netting operations at Atlantic Beach recorded its last multiple owl night on Nov 10 (see Field Note in this issue). There was also a diminishing number of observations after this date from all other localities.

Wintering Saw-whets

Ed Manners of Wenonah, N.J. has been studying wintering Saw-whet Owls for several years by trapping roosting birds and color-marking them. Although he was afield throughout the fall he did not find a Saw-whet until November 25. It would appear that birds passing through before this date were not present long enough to show traces of their residence—pellets or whitewash. This is reflected by the lack of repeats at banding stations.

Mr. Manners bands the owls at a strip of land $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles wide extending about 12 miles along the Delaware River from Bridgeport to Westville, N.J. In this area he marked four Saw-whets during the last week in November, 26 in December, 13 in January, nine in February, and one in

early March. In January he trapped a bird that had been banded at Island Beach, N.J. during the fall of 1965 prior to October 5 (date lacking). This total of 44 birds is not his highest; in his first winter banding he caught about 60. He has never had a banded individual return from a previous winter.

He finds the Saw-whets sociable, often occurring in small groups. Individuals tend to roost in the same spot from day to day. Birds trapped in late November and early December weigh about 80–90 grams, by late February and early March weight has increased “about one-fifth” to 100–110 grams. Birds examined on Long Island during October and November appear lean with little or no traces of fat. (T. Davis).

On Long Island the wintering Saw-whet population was high. Areas at which Saw-whets were constantly observed, and their numbers, include: Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge—one, possibly two; Central Park—one; Jones Beach—seven reported on the Southern Nassau Co. Christmas Count, Jan 2 (including one at Tobay); Cedar Beach—six or seven. Other birds, possibly wintering individuals, were seen at Montauk, Woodlawn Cemetery and Pelham Bay Park.

It was tragic to note the large number of Saw-whets found dead along highways. From December thru February in the vicinity of Jones Beach, Cornelius Ward found 12 dead birds and Richard Cohen found four others. Further inland few car-killed Saw-whets have ever been noticed by Ed Manners. Perhaps this might be attributed to the differences in habitat. Saw-whets might tend to fly at lower heights thru the low coastal thickets than in forested areas further inland. Greater roadway congestion on Long Island could possibly be another factor in the higher mortality rate.

Summary

The 1965 fall invasion of Saw-whet Owls was easily the largest recorded for this species. Ninety-one birds were reported in the Marine Region from September 28 to November 30 and nearly 400 were reported from Ontario south to the Middle Atlantic States from September 8 to early December. Of this latter figure about 285 were reported by banders operating mist nets at night. The bulk of their migration fell between October 3 and November 10 with a peak October 14–18 when 117 were reported from the above localities. By the last week of November most Saw-whets had established winter territories and could be found roosting at the same places from day to day. In an area 12 miles long by 1½ miles wide along the Delaware River in New Jersey, a bander captured 43 roosting Saw-whets from the last week of November to January 31. The wintering population on coastal Long Island was also high, and many birds were found dead on the highways.

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