

Northern Saw-Whet Owl

Aegolius acadicus

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY STEVEN HUY

The northern saw-whet owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) is probably the most overlooked species along the Appalachian Trail corridor. This diminutive owl, the smallest in the East, is only about the size of a robin and is well camouflaged. A brown back with white spots and a white breast with brown streaks help it blend into the background of the thick vegetation in which it prefers to roost. It has large yellow eyes and lacks the “ear” tufts of the more commonly seen screech owl.

The saw-whet primarily breeds in the boreal forest and northern latitudes; however, it has been documented to nest in the higher elevations of the Appalachian Mountains as far south as the Carolinas. Tree cavities, often old woodpecker nests, are the favored brooding spots as this owl, like most others, does not build its own nest.

The saw-whet is the only migratory owl in the East. The migration begins in late September in the northern part of its range and will last into December in the southern states. A two-year cycle, thought to be driven by food availability, dominates the migration pattern in the eastern states. Only a portion of the population is thought to migrate and a larger migration is documented every other year. Every fourth year, an irruption of saw-whets occurs as cone production decreases causing the rodent population to crash. This lack of prey sends a greater number of owls south in search of food. A saw-whet migration study located along a section of the A.T. in Maryland documents several dozens of saw-whets in most years, but will catch several hundred during an irruption, including 300 in October and November of 2007. The Trail corridor protects habitat that is an important stopover point for some of these owls to rest and feed as they head south.

Saw-whets can be found throughout the length

of the Trail during the winter. Areas of forest with thick undergrowth provide shelter from the weather and from larger owls that prey on saw-whets. Here they feed on the mice, shrews and small birds that also make this place their winter home.

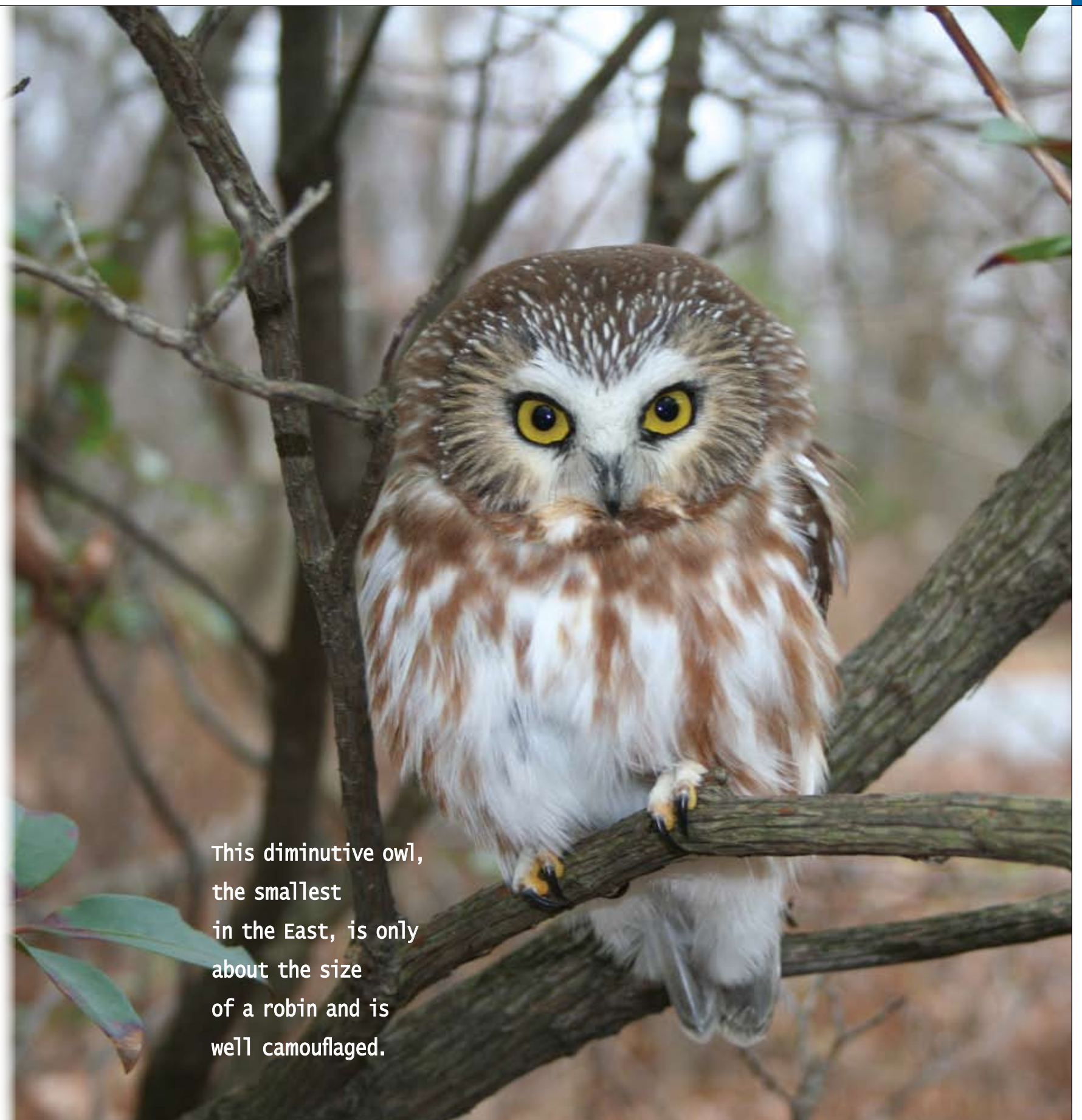
The name saw-whet is said to come from its repetitively tooting, territorial call, similar to the backup beeper of a large vehicle, made during the nesting season. Some people claim it sounds similar to a file being drawn across a saw-tooth while the saw is being sharpened, or “whetted.”

While somewhat common along the A.T. in the winter, this bird is rarely seen, making an encounter with one a special treat. These owls come from areas rarely visited by people and they have not developed a natural fear of humans as most birds have. Rather than fly away as someone approaches, they rely on their excellent camouflage to hide them. Only an experienced, or lucky, eye will succeed in making out the image of one of these owls as they pretend to be a stick, dead leaf or pinecone on their perch. The best way to spot one is to look down instead of up. Finding the “whitewash” or white wax-like droppings of these owls along with tiny pellets of regurgitated fur and bone underneath a roost is the best way to locate them. Look up and you may find a pair of yellow eyes looking back at you.

Steve Huy is an amateur ornithologist who has been studying saw-whet owl migration for more than a decade. His current study location is in Maryland along the Appalachian Trail and has been in operation for 12 seasons. In this time, he has banded over a thousand saw-whets. He is also co-founder of Project OwlNet, an organization dedicated to the monitoring of saw-whet migration and populations throughout North America, and a model for migratory owl studies on other continents.

For more information about the northern saw-whet owl and Project OwlNet, visit:

www.projectowl.net



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