

A SENSE OF WONDER

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Imagine a creature. When you look in its ear, you can see the back of its eyeball. Its ears are asymmetrical, one high on the side of the head and the other much lower. It has huge rings around its enormous eyes. The extraordinary head takes up one third of its body. And then there are the talons....! This freak of nature silently haunts the forests and meadows at night, killing as it goes. It lives near you. If you ever see one, you will break into a smile, your heart will melt, you will fall in love, and you will be in awe of the beauty and the wonder of this captivating being. Meet the Northern Saw-whet Owl.

The impossibly beautiful saw-whet owl is the smallest owl in Pennsylvania and can be seen and heard throughout our region in the fall and winter. Specializing in small rodents such as mice and voles as well as small birds, insects and even bats, this tiny raptor is a formidable hunter. During their breeding season they dwell in mixed coniferous forests from southern Alaska and across the boreal forests of southern Canada with ranges extending south into the Rockies as well as the Appalachian Mountains. Like most small owls, they must lay their eggs in tree cavities previously excavated by woodpeckers. Outside of the breeding season the saw-whet owl is thought to be largely nomadic and solitary, migrating south for the winter, but there is still much to be learned about this secretive bird.

A few miles from Malvern at Willistown Conservation Trust's Rushton Farm serious scientific research is being conducted on these creatures by a dedicated team of bird banders for a few weeks each autumn. The team has been capturing and banding these pint-sized raptors for twelve years as part of a larger regional collaboration called Project OwlNet which began in the 1990's to try

to understand the cyclical migrations, habitat use and population dynamics of this mysterious bird.

Using an audible lure, the sound of a male Saw-whet's mating call, they attract the migrating owls to one of the six mist nets strategically placed in the woods. One person constantly monitors the nets so that any captured birds can be quickly extracted which requires amazing skill as the bird is tangled in fine netting and, well, there are those sharp talons. Oh, and this all takes place in the dark because saw-whet owls, like other owls, are nocturnal. When freed, the subject is placed in a drawstring cloth bag to protect it and taken to the barn where the research begins.

What follows is a carefully defined sequence of measurements and physical exams, standardized so that all scientists working with these creatures are collecting and analyzing the same types of data. The captive is weighed, measured, examined, and an aluminum band with a unique nine-digit number is attached to its leg. If it is a "recapture", either foreign (banded elsewhere) or local, there will be data in a system maintained by The Bird Banding Lab (BBL) so that comparisons can be made regarding the health, longevity and movement of the bird. All bird banders must be federally licensed under the USGS to perform this important research.

While this research is short in duration, the hours are grueling, and the conditions can be taxing. It's done in the late autumn, outdoors by cover of darkness, and in an unheated building where it can be numbingly cold. If large numbers of owls are present the crew may work until 3 or 4 A.M. But there is magic here as well. There is a high degree of respect and concern for the tiny creature they have temporarily intercepted coupled with excitement and joy of doing a job that may help preserve the species they are studying. The adorableness of the birds and their relatively docile

acceptance of the necessary handling have observers of the process ooohing and aahing. And then there is the wonder of the release. The owl is taken outdoors to an open space where it sits unimpeded on the arm or shoulder of its human escort. Gradually, its pupils adjust to the dark after the glare of the indoor lights. The silence of the night is broken by the distant recorded call that led to its capture and by the occasional calls of fellow saw-whets in the nearby woods. Then, in an instant with a silent flap of wings, the momentary bond that linked this owl with these people is severed, and the creature returns to the wild having left a record of its vital statistics to help protect the future of its kind.

The Bird Conservation Team at Willistown Conservation Trust (a non-profit land trust) is federally licensed for mark-recapture studies of both songbirds and Northern Saw-whet Owls. They band birds at Rushton Woods Preserve and Farm to understand how birds are using the land preserved by the Trust and to contribute to global bird conservation research. The songbird banding station is open to the public (by registration only) for viewing on Thursday mornings during spring songbird banding (April-May) and fall songbird banding (September- October). Saw-whet Owl banding is private at this time. To learn more about the Willistown Conservation Trust visit wctrust.org



Saw Whet Owl