

Northern Saw-whet Owl

Aegolius acadicus

The most secretive of our resident owls, the tiny saw-whet is quite adept at remaining hidden during the daylight hours. Its days are normally spent concealed in dense vegetation such as the outer branches of pine trees, thick coniferous shrubs, and impenetrable grape and greenbrier tangles. Considerable effort is required to locate roosting owls, and only a very small number are ever found. Saw-whets do not become active until one or two hours after sunset when they will forage along the brushy margins of woods and fields. Their territorial activities are also most evident during these first hours after total darkness.

Northern Saw-whet Owls proved to be extremely elusive during the Atlas Project. The only record was obtained in 1982, when a recently fledged young owl was discovered in a residential yard in Bay Village (Cuyahoga County). The owl was barely capable of flight, indicating it must have been raised in the vicinity of its capture. It was fed for several days in captivity, and subsequently released.

The paucity of summering Northern Saw-whet Owls during the Atlas Project is typical of their status within Ohio during recent decades. In fact, there have been very few summer records since 1940 with breeding pairs in the Cleveland area during 1946 and 1964, at Toledo in 1966, and near Youngstown in 1979 while a territorial pair was discovered in western Lucas County in 1978 (Peterjohn 1989a). They may have been more numerous within Ohio earlier in this century. Ashtabula County may have hosted the only breeding population, where adults were noted at seven locations between 1928 and 1932 (Hicks 1933a). There were also scattered breeding records from Ashland, Franklin, Geauga, Guernsey, Holmes, Knox, Lake, Licking, Mercer, Muskingum, Paulding, Portage, Tuscarawas, and Williams counties as well as a May sighting near Cincinnati (Hicks 1934, 1935). These latter reports were primarily composed of single pairs occupying a location for only one year.

Based on the small number of recent breeding records, Northern Saw-whet Owls appear to be very sporadic summer residents in Ohio. Since nesting pairs are very easily overlooked, however, a small and locally distributed breeding population could easily go undetected. Unless a survey is undertaken to specifically search for nesting saw-whets, their actual status and distribution within Ohio during summer may never be conclusively established. Since Ohio is located at the southern edge of their range in eastern North America (AOU 1983), the size of any breeding population will undoubtedly prove to be fairly small.

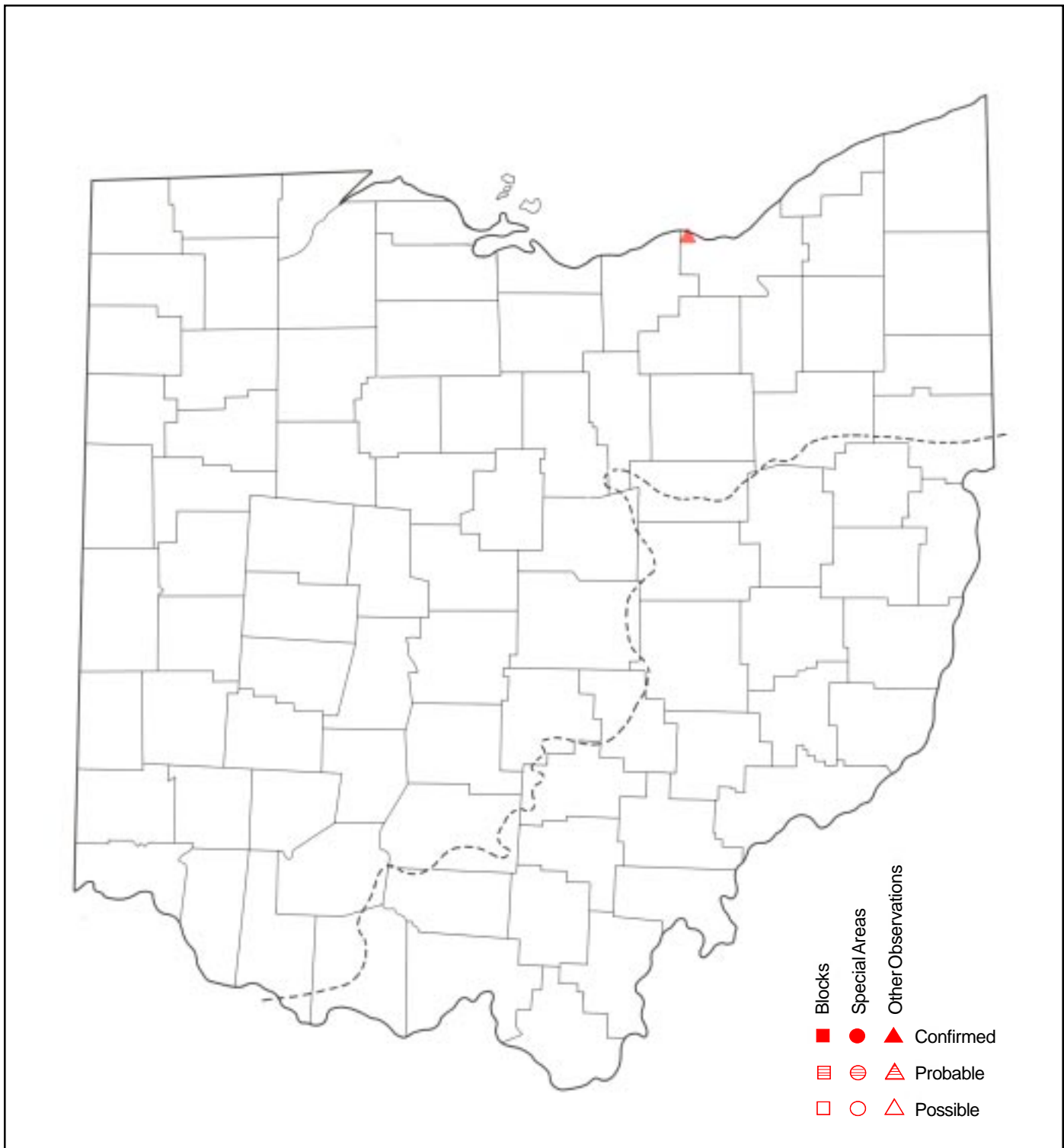
Very little information is available on their breeding biology and chronology within Ohio and elsewhere in their range. Breeding pairs within Ohio have been found in swamp forests dominated by hemlocks in Ashtabula County, dry second growth deciduous woods, and residential areas with many planted

conifers. A similar variety of breeding habitats has been reported elsewhere in their range, although damp coniferous forests may constitute their preferred nesting locations in most areas (Peck and James 1983, Voous 1988). Their choice of breeding sites is influenced by the availability of suitable cavities. Most pairs occupy abandoned woodpecker cavities, although saw-whets are occasionally found in nest boxes. Most nests have been located in dead deciduous trees (Peck and James 1983).



Tim Daniel - Division of Wildlife

A Northern Saw-whet Owl nest with eggs has never been discovered within Ohio. Only one active nest has ever been found; it contained young owls in Ashtabula County on May 30, 1931 (Hicks 1933a). All other confirmed breeding records have been of adults accompanied by dependent young and recently fledged saw-whets. These sightings extend between May 24 and July 8 (Hicks 1934, Williams 1950). If these records are indicative of their breeding chronology in Ohio, then most clutches are laid between mid-March and mid-April. Young owls in the nest may be expected between mid-April and mid-June.



Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	–	–	–	–
Till Plain	271	–	–	–	–
Ill. Till Plain	46	–	–	–	–
Glaciated Plateau	140	–	–	–	–
Unglaciated Plateau	212	–	–	–	–

Summary of Breeding Status

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
Total	–	–
Confirmed	–	–
Probable	–	–
Possible	–	–