

Uncovering the secret lives of Northern Saw-whet Owls: a community effort

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This presentation will share the story of how a community of people helped shed light on the lives of Northern Saw-whet Owls (*Aegolius acadicus*), an enigmatic species due to its nocturnal habits and cryptic behaviour. Central to the effort is a collaboration between two long-term owl monitoring programs: (i) a fall owl migration monitoring station on the campus of Université Sainte-Anne that I operate with my students as part of an Ornithology course and (ii) Birds Canada's Atlantic Nocturnal Owl Survey, which generates estimates of breeding owl abundance in the Maritimes. Through these two programs, dozens of students and citizen scientists have been mentored and trained in bird banding techniques and owl identification. During 2012-2020, we observed several years marked by dramatic increases in densities of migrating Northern Saw-whet Owls in southwest Nova Scotia. These irruptive migrations seemed to be best explained by elevated breeding abundance of saw-whets in the Maritimes followed by dispersal of juveniles in good condition. Beyond what we have learned about these owls, this project underscores the importance of engaging youth and the public in hands-on ecological research. I have witnessed firsthand in young students how these experiences foster greater appreciation for wildlife and help cultivate new generations of conservation-minded citizens.

Keywords: citizen science, student-led research, southwest Nova Scotia, irruptive migrations, Northern Saw-whet Owls

Oral presentation