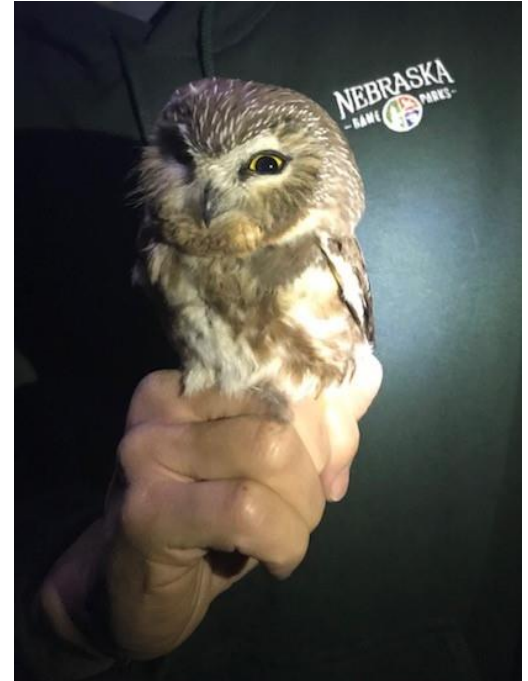


Northern Saw-whet Owl Autumn migration in Eastern Nebraska

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Despite being one of the continent's smallest owls, the Northern Saw-whet Owl has become one of the best-studied migratory predators in eastern North America. For the past 25 years, an ever-growing network of bird-banders and owl enthusiasts have been targeting saw-whet owls during their fall migrations, usually from October to mid-November. The bulk of the research and banding efforts for this species occurs in the eastern U.S., Canada, and the upper Midwest. In Nebraska, there are few confirmed records of saw-whets nesting in larger tracts of ponderosa pine in the panhandle of Nebraska, as well as probable reports of breeding in north-central Nebraska. Recent banding efforts during early autumn have also documented limited numbers of saw-whets migrating through western and central Nebraska, but overall information and sightings away from potentially breeding areas in the state are scant.

Beginning in the fall of 2019, biologists with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Nongame Bird Program began targeted banding operations during fall evenings around Lincoln to determine the extent to which these tinny owls migrate through the eastern part of the state away from the Missouri River Valley. Utilizing funds from the Wildlife Conservation Fund, [this research](#) was able to continue for 3 years and provided new insights into this species in Nebraska.



Northern Saw-whet Owl after banding and data collection. All banding, marking, and sampling is conducted under a federally authorized permit issued by the USGS. Photo by Stephen Brenner.



The wings of Northern Saw-whet owls are helpful to determine the age of migrating individuals. Photo by Joel Jorgensen.

Overall, it appears that saw-whets are a somewhat reliable migrant in the eastern parts of the state given appropriate habitat and timing. Migratory numbers seem to peak in early November, and the annual volume of migrants appear to fluctuate in synchrony with breeding and migratory numbers observed in the upper Midwest and southern Canada. It is likely that Nebraska plays an important role in the migration ecology of this species in the larger region, and we now know that much more about this mysterious and incredible little owl.

