

ILLUMINATING THE NOCTURNAL MIGRATION OF THE SAW-WHET OWL

Study Finds Birds Plentiful But Habitat Precarious

Most birders consider themselves lucky to ever glimpse a northern saw-whet owl. The diminutive predators (adults are about 8 inches long) with lustrous golden eyes are nocturnal, hiding in thick cover during the day. Because they are seldom seen, they were thought to be rare. But now researchers contributing to a North American study of saw-whet owl migration are demonstrating that the elusive birds are all around us.

Project OwlNet, founded in the mid-1990s by Dave Brinker, an ecologist with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, involves a grass-roots network of more than 30 banding stations across the United States and Canada. During fall and spring nights, banding volunteers lure the birds into mist nets by playing tapes of the owls' "toot toot toot" call. The teams record the owls' sex, weight and fat stores and estimate their age by examining patterns of

feather molt on their wings. By monitoring the population, the project aims to track any declines in the birds' range.

Kevin Dodge, a wildlife biology professor at Garrett College, in western Maryland, sets up nest boxes and bands saw-whet chicks for Project OwlNet at several Nature Conservancy properties in the state, including Cranesville Swamp Preserve. During the fall migration, he and his students capture and band adult owls near the preserve. The Conservancy is working to protect the saw-whets' preferred breeding habitat in the Central Appalachians: bogs and other wetlands with mature conifers, such as red spruce. The Cranesville preserve, near the West Virginia border, holds one of the best remaining examples of red spruce in Maryland.

With more than 100,000 saw-whets now banded, researchers are learning details about the birds' travels, including

distance, speed and energy spent. One of the quickest trips recorded was made by an owl banded in Cape May, New Jersey, that was recaptured nearly 80 miles away on Assateague Island, Maryland, just three hours later.

"Every time someone catches a banded owl, we learn something new," says Brinker. "That's a huge return on investment."

—JENNIFER USCHER

Learn how and where you can get involved in monitoring the saw-whet, the smallest owl in eastern North America, and watch and listen to one on video at | nature.org/magazine |



SURVEY SAYS: AMERICANS CARE ABOUT CONSERVATION

A new poll of 1,500 registered voters suggests that Americans are willing to pay more than lip service to a conservation ethic. A majority of those surveyed—56 percent—said they would support a tax increase of \$50 per person to be used to protect local water quality, parks and wildlife habitat.

The bipartisan survey, conducted this spring, found that support for conservation cuts across demographic groups: Large numbers of Westerners, Republicans (generally more resistant to tax increases) and Latinos (a key constituency in the November elections) were all willing to open their wallets to improve the protection of land and water.

The poll, sponsored by The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land, was conducted by both Republican and Democratic research firms. Its findings should comfort conservationists disheartened by Gallup's 2004 Earth Day poll, which found that a record-low proportion of Americans believe that environmental protections

should take precedence over economic growth "when the two interests conflict."

Eighty percent of those surveyed in the Conservancy/Trust poll consider themselves "conservationists"; virtually the same proportion (79 percent) said they will consider a candidate's stance on conservation when they vote in November.

Support for land conservation was directly related to concerns about quality of life and water quality. The poll found increasing concern over suburban sprawl and lack of open space, with 39 percent of respondents saying their community is growing "too fast" and just 12 percent saying it is growing "too slowly." Eighty-four percent said it is "very important" to protect drinking water. "The public connects land conservation with water," says Carol Baudler, a senior adviser for government relations at the Conservancy who helped design the poll. "In all of our communications, that's a message that we emphasize, and it works very, very well." —BEN GOSE

Seventy-nine percent said they will consider a candidate's stance on conservation when they vote in November.