



NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL

Strigiformes
Family: Strigidae
Genus: *Aegolius*
Species: *acadicus*



Range: Western part of the United States and in some of Mexico and the southern portion of Canada

Habitat: Coniferous and deciduous forests

Niche: Nocturnal, carnivorous, arboreal

Wild diet: mostly mice particularly deer mice, some small birds, and the occasional chipmunk

Zoo diet:

Life Span: (Wild) 5 years

(Captivity) 8 years

Sexual dimorphism: Females are slightly larger than males.

Location in SF Zoo: Children's Zoo – Animal Resource Center

APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

The Northern Saw-whet Owl is a small, short-bodied owl with a short tail and a very large head with no ear tufts. They have a prominent facial disk, a light, white face with brown and cream streaks; they also have a dark beak and yellow eyes. The underparts are pale with dark shaded areas; the upper parts are brown with white spots. Flight feathers are spotted white. Fledglings are solid brown above with light buff bellies and a well-defined white triangle on their foreheads.

Weight: 2.3 - 5.3 oz

Length: 7.71 - 8.3 in

Wingspan: 16.5 – 18.9 in

Like many owls, these birds have excellent hearing and exceptional vision in low light, which they use from their low perch for hunting. They have asymmetrical ear openings in their skulls, which allows them to more easily distinguish both vertical and horizontal sound position. Lastly, its facial disk further amplifies sound.

The saw-whet captures prey using its strong feet and sharp talons. Each foot has four toes, and the outer toe of each foot can be rotated in a number of positions. This allows the northern saw-whet owl to maximize the strength of its grip on its prey.

STATUS & CONSERVATION

Northern saw-whet owls are not threatened or endangered. They are fairly common across their range, but their numbers may drop due to development, removal of nesting snags and hazards encountered in migration. Logging in mature and old-growth forests also threatens their numbers. Listed on CITES Appendix II.

COMMUNICATION AND OTHER BEHAVIOR

Northern Saw-whet owls are usually silent. During the breeding season, they will make a repeated whistled "hoop" sound, usually to find a mate. They make a "skiew" call when alarmed, which resembles a saw being sharpened on a whetstone and hence their name. When the male flies to the nest with food it gives a rapid staccato burst of toots, and the female responds with a soft "swEE".

These Owls hunt mainly at dusk and dawn and are opportunistic hunters that use the "sit and wait" tactic to swoop down onto prey on the ground from low hunting perches.

COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

Although generally monogamous, northern saw-whet owls form pairs that last only through the breeding season. They nest in tree cavities and old nests made by other small raptors. The female will lay a clutch of four to seven eggs at two-day intervals. The male brings food to the female and defends the nesting area. The eggs are incubated for 27-29 days. The hatchings are asynchronous. The female rarely leaves the nest during incubation. She leaves the eggs for only one or two short trips each night, to defecate and cough up a pellet. After hatching, the female broods the young for at least another 18 days. After this, she may assist the male with feeding for up to a month thereafter. The male helps feed her and the chicks throughout. If prey is abundant and it is not too late in the breeding season, she may leave the chicks and the male to find another male and hatch another brood. The young fledge 4-5 weeks from hatching, and are thought to be fully independent between 10 to 13 weeks old.

Incubation: 27 – 29 days	Sexual Maturity: 1 year
# of eggs: 3 - 7	Fledging: 4 -5 weeks

MISCELLANEOUS

When threatened a Saw-whet owl will elongate its body in order to appear like a tree branch or bump, often bringing one wing around to the front of its body.

Northern Saw-whet Owls are unusual among North American owls in that the young can fly reasonably well as soon as they leave the nest.

Sources:

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Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume 5 © 1999 Lynx Edicions, p 228-229

<http://www.owlpages.com/>

<http://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

<http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/>