

Two novel behaviours in a Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*)

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ON 31 OCTOBER 2005, during a walk along the north shore near the Tip of Long Point, Ontario, a Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) was noticed sitting on the head of a dead Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*) that was on the beach. The owl was watched for a minute, and when it was approached it flushed onto a nearby downed tree. It was suspected that the owl might have been feeding on the carcass of the scoter, a novel behaviour, so the owl was left in hopes that it might return to feed on the scoter and provide another opportunity to observe it.

An hour later the owl was again found on the head of the scoter, but this time it was observed feeding and continued to do so for several minutes. When the owl became alerted to my

presence it ceased feeding and watched me intensely. Only when it was approached did it flush. However, when it did, it flew into a hole in the bank along the shoreline. The owl was left for a few minutes to see if it would emerge. At this time the scoter's head was inspected and this revealed a previously unopened wound and a small portion of flesh missing. The owl remained in the hole and did not appear to want to leave. It was subsequently caught to determine if there was a reason that would cause it to scavenge. The owl was found to have a band on and records indicate it was originally banded on 29 October 2005 at the Tip Station of the Long Point Bird Observatory. Its file indicated that it dropped 5.9g from its original weight of 88.1g to 82.2g.



Figure 1. Northern Saw-whet Owl at the head of a dead Surf Scoter, 31 October 2005, near the tip of Long Point, Lake Erie, Ontario. Photo: Mike Boyd

Discussion

A literature review indicated that few of the North American owls have been known to scavenge, with confirmed records for only Northern Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*), Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) and Northern Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*) (Lynch 2007, Patterson 2007). However, it is suspected that several other species may scavenge including Boreal (*Aegolius funereus*), Great Gray (*Strix nebulosa*), Barred (*Strix varia*), and Northern Saw-whet Owls (Bent 1938,

Nero 1987). The Northern Saw-whet Owl record was of a second hand report of a bird feeding on a Snowshoe Hare (*Lepus americanus*) that was never confirmed (Bent 1938). Wild owls are known to cache food on nearby branches, and retrieve them at a later time, and are additionally suspected to feed on bait on traps set for furbearing animals (Nero 1987). Owls in captivity will readily accept dead prey. This may be because food is in similar condition to food cached in the wild. Owl behaviour usually precludes studying the frequency of this behaviour and

thus would make the likelihood of recording such an event unlikely.

Northern Saw-whet Owls are not known to feed upon prey much larger than themselves, and they have not been confirmed to scavenge (Cannings 1993). This is, therefore, the first confirmed record of scavenging for this species. A likely reason for scavenging was due to the weight loss that occurred during days between banding and recapture. Weather during this period had been cool and wet. This would have impeded its migration, reduced foraging opportunities and increased its metabolic needs, possibly resulting in the weight loss that occurred. From this perspective it appears that the owl was opportunistically using the Surf Scoter as an alternative food source due to an immediate need to replenish its energy stores for survival and migration.

The use of an underground roost or hiding location is also novel behaviour. The only North American owl known to use underground cavities is the Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) (Haug *et al.* 1993). This is the first report of a Northern Saw-whet Owl using an underground cavity to hide. It may have been the owl's need for food that forced it to make use of such an unusual hiding location. The owl was reluctant to leave the scoter on both flushing incidents, and when it did flush it remained in the vicinity. The lack of dense vegetation within the vicinity of the scoter may have made the hole appear more attractive as a hiding location.

These observations indicate that many gaps may still exist in our knowledge of owl

behaviour and that new behaviours may still be observed. Whether owls routinely use scavenging as an alternative foraging method is still unknown. Further research and reporting of novel behaviours are hence thoroughly encouraged.

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