

## CHATTING WITH SAW-WHETS

by Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

Every Christmas Count is memorable, and Nantucket's January first enterprise this year was no exception. There, for the first time, I had a dialogue with Saw-whet Owls. Soheil Zende, Christine Newman, and I arrived at the Polpis Woods about 5:30 A.M. Except for the occasional squeak of wind-swayed trees, no sound was heard. Then, at about 6:00 A.M. (less than seventy minutes before sunrise), two or three Saw-whets began vocalizing. The birds continued until at least 6:45 A.M., well after the sky had become very bright. Near the end of New Year's Day, we returned to the forest; and at 4:45 P.M. (twenty-three minutes after sunset), I was able to elicit more, though much less enthusiastic, responses.

In all, our ears picked up five different types of Saw-whet vocalizations.

1. One was the familiar call featured on a Peterson recording, a fairly low-pitched, mellow "peep" repeated again and again at intervals of a second or a bit less. The tempo was extremely regular though the pitch varied from time to time. This call is very easily imitated by whistling.

2. Startlingly loud and presumptive for so small a bird was its "kow-kow" call, with each syllable strongly accented at the beginning. The notes are issued sharply and in quick succession; the entire call takes only about one second.

On that afternoon I heard a single "que" call that seemed closely related to one syllable of the "kow-kow." Both vocalizations contained overtones, giving them a slightly buzzy quality.

3. A catlike whine was also uttered in the afternoon. It was drawn out and quickly repeated - three times, I believe. This call was reminiscent of a Long-eared Owl vocalization, but it seemed higher pitched.

4. The Saw-whets also gave a kingfisherlike rattle, heard only by Soheil and Chris in the morning. This call was apparently stated in agitation - the birds were buzzing my companions at the time!

5. Most fascinating of all was the great variety of squeaks, clicks, and other indescribable Saw-whet noises. Some were very short, thin, and extremely high-pitched with a metallic or finchlike quality. One note in particular reminded Soheil and me very much of an Evening Grosbeak's flight call. I had the impression that all the messages in this category were "trivial inter-owl dialogue;" they were so soft and omnidirectional that it would seem impossible for

a predator to home in on the sender.

After writing down my impressions, I read Forbush's and Bent's characterizations of Saw-whet calls. I could appreciate what both authors were describing, but you will have a tough time reconciling their verbal parodies with mine. On next year's Christmas Count I'll have a tape recorder along to capture the wonderful ventriloquial and varied voices of the Saw-whet.

Was the forest really quiet of owls when we first arrived? Thinking back, there wasn't any wind at all!



*Northern Saw-whet Owl*

*Illustration by Denise Braunhardt*

LEIF J. ROBINSON is editor of Sky and Telescope, an international popular magazine of astronomy and space science. He has been a bird student for fifteen years with a principal interest in resident populations and the statistical means for assessing them. Mr. Robinson is also active in studying the migration of birds of prey.

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### TASL BOSTON HARBOR HERON CENSUS

This year Bird Observer's Take a Second Look (TASL) is once again organizing a series of Boston Harbor Heron Censuses. Herons, primarily Snowy Egrets, will be tallied as they pass over strategic spots in Boston Harbor at dawn on the following Sundays:

May 8, 22; June 5, 19; July 3, 17, 31;  
August 14, 28; September 4, 18; October 2, 16.

The spots we need to cover are Belle Isle Marsh in East Boston, Squantum Marsh in Quincy, Long Island in the harbor, and Weir River in Weymouth. We particularly need volunteers for the latter three spots.

Last summer, we conducted a pilot census of this sort at Belle Isle Marsh. On a number of mornings, especially late in the summer, spectacular flights of herons were observed, culminating in 131 Snowy Egrets and 5 Great Egrets on September 11. (A more detailed report on these censuses appears in TASL News for April 1983.) As a result of the pilot census, we have developed an instruction and tally sheet to make record keeping easy and uniform.

If you would like to help with this project and monitor one of the most exciting avian displays in Boston Harbor, we urge you to contact the Heron Census coordinator: Soheil Zendehe, 380 Broadway, Somerville 02145, 628-8990.

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### BREEDING RECORDS NEEDED

The Breeding Records Project of Bird Observer's Field Study Committee was announced in April 1982. Its twofold purpose was to obtain nesting data for the Nest Record Program (NRP) run by Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology since 1965 and thus to obtain information on the nesting habitat of certain target species of local interest.

Although hundreds of amateur and professional field ornithologists annually contribute thousands of nest records to the Cornell lab, the RESPONSE FROM MASSACHUSETTS BIRDERS HAS BEEN POOR. The North American NRP has collected, processed, and now computerizes information on the nesting biology of birds from over 250,000 nest records on file. These data are available to any qualified researcher interested in aspects of avian reproductive biology such as geographic variation in breeding dates, clutch size, nest location and habitat, cowbird parasitism, and nesting success.

TO BE A PART OF THIS PROGRAM, the observer simply records on a convenient nest record card information on species, location, habitat, and history of that particular nesting attempt. This information can be gathered in the course of one's regular birding. Repeat visits to nests are especially valuable, but all data are welcome even though the nest cannot be checked again to determine success. In the fall, the record cards can be sent to the local project coordinator. All contributors receive semi-annual newsletters summarizing requests from researchers, many of whom are studying endangered species.

TO JOIN THIS WORTHWHILE EFFORT, obtain a supply of cards and a set of instructions from Cornell directly (Laboratory of Ornithology, Nest Record Program, Ithaca NY 14850) or from the REGIONAL COORDINATOR, JIM BERRY (136 County Road, Ipswich MA 01938, telephone evenings: 617-356-5505).

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