

NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL IN THE SIERRA SAN PEDRO MÁRTIR: FIRST BAJA CALIFORNIA RECORD

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On the evening of 5 July 1993, we discovered a Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) at approximately 2300 m elevation in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir, Baja California (Norte). We found the bird near kilometer marker 86 while owling along the main road through Parque Nacional Sierra de San Pedro Mártir, about 2 km east of La Corona de Arriba. At this point the main road from the west descended steeply into a canyon separating La Corona de Arriba from the higher meadows at Vallecitos to the east. The habitat was relatively open mixed coniferous forest composed of Jeffrey Pine (*Pinus jeffreyi*), White Fir (*Abies concolor*), and Sugar Pine (*Pinus lambertiana*), with little ground cover. A small grove of Quaking Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) occupied the canyon bottom. It was cool and still under clear skies, with a nearly full moon just above the horizon when we found the owl.

At approximately 2200 hours, the owl first responded to our whistling with a single loud high-pitched "scree" note. In our experience, this response is typical of the Saw-whet Owl and we tentatively identified the bird from this note. We were convinced of its identity only after the owl began to give the normal song of this species. Over the next half hour we heard an estimated six bouts of singing as the bird moved over an area of about 0.5 ha. Singing consisted of a monotonous series of single notes at a medium pitch, given at a rate of approximately two notes per second. Singing bouts lasted 1 to 4 minutes.

We heard the bird from as close as 6–7 m and tried to see it with flashlights, but the bird remained consistently out of sight in the dense foliage of firs where we pinpointed the sound several times at heights of 4–7 m. Nevertheless, we saw it twice, briefly. Erickson saw the bird in silhouette, without light, as it swooped toward his face in response to squeaking and squealing sounds. He noted only its small size and compact shape. Barron saw what was apparently the bird, also in silhouette only, and without light, as it flew over the road above him.

Barron and Erickson are very familiar with the vocalizations of the Northern Saw-whet Owl from dozens of encounters with the species over the previous 25 years, the most recent in March 1993. Erickson's experience is limited to California, whereas Barron's ranges from the western U.S. to the prairie provinces and the Appalachians. Wurster was aware of the typical song but had never heard the species in life. This individual sounded consistently "hoarser" (less clear) and softer than most birds we had previously heard, but the pattern and pitch of the calls were perfect, and left no doubt in our minds as to the identity of the bird. "Hoarse" individuals of several species of owls have been heard on occasion in California (J. Winter pers. comm.), and R. Stallcup (in litt.) has heard a single Saw-whet Owl in California change from hoarse to clear notes in mid-series. The cause and/or significance of this is unknown to us.

The only likely source of confusion with vocalizations of this species is the Northern Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*). Except in the cape region, home of the distinctive endemic subspecies *G. g. hoskinsii*, the Northern Pygmy-Owl has not been adequately documented in Baja California (Grinnell 1928, AOU 1983, Wilbur

NOTES

1987, Howell and Webb in press). We do not consider Wauer's (1992: 86) brief mention of a bird heard only (Wauer pers. comm.) or the map of this species published by NGS (1987) to be conclusive. Three things, in our experience, distinguished our bird from a Northern Pygmy-Owl: (1) although the pitch of individual Pygmy-Owl notes can be very similar to those of the Saw-whet Owl, and Pygmy-Owls can give notes in rapid succession for a short period, we have never heard them give identical notes in this manner for minutes at a time as is typical of the Saw-whet Owl; (2) we have not heard anything like the "scree" note described here from the Pygmy-Owl; and (3) Pygmy-Owls normally call at twilight, or even in daylight, but rarely late at night.

Northern Saw-whet Owls are found across much of North America from Alaska south to Oaxaca, but there are no previous records from Baja California (Grinnell 1928, AOU 1983, Wilbur 1987, Howell and Webb in press). The species is rare to uncommon and local in montane southern California, including the Palomar and Cuyamaca mountains of San Diego County (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Unitt 1984). Thus, the Sierra San Pedro Mártir represents a range extension of approximately 250 km. Habitat suitable for this species is extensive in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir, and future records may reveal a breeding population. An alternative explanation is that our bird was merely the remnant of an irruption of Saw-whet Owls into the area. Monson and Phillips (1981) stated that in Arizona "irruptions in some winters bring large numbers to a region, where they may stay for a few years and nest." Saw-whet Owls were unusually numerous in the Kayenta area of Navajo County in northern Arizona in spring and summer 1993, and a rare lowland record was established in the Phoenix area in late winter 1993 (G. H. Rosenberg pers. comm.), so our record may be related. Similar irruptions have not been detected in southern California, although apparent fluctuations in numbers in the San Gabriel Mountains could be the result of them (K. L. Garrett pers. comm.).

The Northern Saw-whet Owl is but the latest of a number of species first found summering in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir in the last decade (R. E. Webster and Wurster pers. obs.; Howell and Webb 1992). Additional investigations will likely reveal some of these species in the Sierra Juarez as well.

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NOTES

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Northern Saw-whet Owl

Lithograph by Linda Schliesman Erickson