

NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL NEST ON EAST LIMESTONE ISLAND

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The nest

A Northern Saw-whet Owl *Aegolius acadicus brooksi* nest found on East Limestone Island on 27 June 2001 is the first documented record of a nest site for this non-migratory sub-species restricted to the Haida Gwaii archipelago (S. Sealy and Rolf Krahe, personal communication). Although common throughout its range, there may be only a few records of potential nest sites of *A. a. brooksi* on Haida Gwaii (Campbell et al. 1990).

The nest was in a Sitka spruce *Picea sitchensis* snag, classified as Category 5 under the British Columbia Wildlife Tree Classification System (no bark, decayed heartwood, dead for at least 15 years). The tree was situated alongside a well-traveled trail, next to a small creek and was on the edge of the shore, 15 m from a small cabin. The snag, Wildlife Tree 1 (WT 1) measured 15 m high with a diameter of 130 cm. The nest entrance was 9 m above ground and the hole was 78 mm tall by 74 mm wide. The cavity extended back 18 cm and was 30 cm deep. The cavity was used by Northern Flickers *Colaptes auratus* in 1992.

In 2001, saw-whet calls were first heard on 5 May, (about one month later than recorded in previous years) and continued nightly until 15 June. The owl roosted in a tree near the top of Spring Valley, and emitted a constant “advertising” call (see Cannings 1993) from dusk to dawn. These calls were clearly audible from North Cove and in the cabin area.

From 2 - 15 June, an owl would frequent the area near the cabin, calling from trees to the south, west, and north sides of the cabin. During the week of 8 to 15 June, on three occasions, we saw a Saw-whet Owl sitting on a small spruce (20 cm diameter) at dusk directly in front of the cabin, only 3 m from the door. The owl would sit on a branch (3.5 m high.) quietly and not appear disturbed by our presence. On several occasions between 15 and 29 June, an owl flew into the cabin area and headed towards WT 1. On the evening of 27 June, an owl flew towards WT 1 and landed below the old Northern Flicker nest cavity (J. Fournier, personal communication). From that date until camp closure on 27 July, WT 1 was observed daily.

Behavior and activities after June 27

Once we determined the location of the nest, we made daily observations of the nest site, recording activities in the evenings and during the day. We observed a male owl coming to the nest with prey, a female calling from within the nest, chicks calling, both adults on the tree, the feeding of a female and chicks, and heard three distinct calls: a visiting call, a female response and a chick begging call.

When the male came into the nest area, he would make a “visiting” call as he approached. A female within the nest would give a “response” call (soft tsst, tsst, tsst). The male then would fly to WT 1, often with prey, briefly stick his head inside the cavity, then immediately fly off. On 2 July, the male landed on the nest tree with prey in his talons (possibly a deer mouse) and we heard young chicks peeping inside the cavity. On 3 July, a female was looking out of the nest hole at 2100 h. The next day, the female left the nest at 2230 h, whilst the male was calling nearby. On 7 July, an owl (probably female) left the nest cavity during the late afternoon and flew away into the forest. The next day, 8 July, an owl stuck its head out of the nest, flew out and sat on a nearby tree then returned into the nest hole at 1700 h.

Both male and female owls seemed undisturbed by human presence, as evidenced by several observations of the female watching people walk by, or when the male would perch on the tree in front of the cabin or sit in the regenerated spruce trees surrounding the nest tree. A chick stuck its head out of the nest on 20 and 21 July. We noticed that whenever the male would sit in the regenerated spruce trees in the early

evenings, Hermit Thrush and Winter Wrens would give alarm calls and on 14 July, Winter Wrens were dive-bombing the unfazed owl sitting on a small spruce near the nest site.

Camp closed on 27 July with the chick(s) still remaining in the nest cavity. On 1 August, I returned to Limestone for a short visit, checked the nest and did not hear, or see any owls, eggshells or pellets in the area around the nest tree.

REFERENCES

- Campbell, W.R., N.K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J.M. Cooper, G.W. Kaiser and M.C.E. McNall. 1990. The Birds of British Columbia. Volume II: Nonpasserines. Royal British Columbia Museum and Environment Canada, Vancouver, BC. 636 pp.
- Canning, R. J. 1993. Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*). In The Birds of North America, No. 42 (A. Poole and F. Gill, Eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D.C.: The American Ornithologists Union.

Appendix 1

Field notes for the activity of the first Northern Saw-whet Owl nest on East Limestone Island, 2001

- 5 May, 22.00 - Calling throughout night from Spring Valley area
- 7-31 May, 22.00 - "Advertising call" continuous dusk to dawn
- 7 June – 23 July, Various hours - Calling, visuals and nesting activity in area of cabin
- 12 June, 21.00 - Adult on spruce tree branch (3.5 m ht.) in front of cabin (3m from door), flew to tree on north side of cabin (2.7 m from cabin)
- 13 June, 21.00 - Adult on spruce tree branch in front of cabin
- 16 June, 20.30 - Adult on spruce tree branch in front of cabin
- 20 June, 21.00 - Adult flying to and from cabin area, some 'visiting' calls
- 22 June, 21.15 - Adult heard calling near cabin
- 26 June, 2200 - Adult flying to and from North side of WT 1
- 27 June, 2130 - Female looking out from nest hole on WT 1 (north side) male flew in 3 times, entered hole, prey in talons; gave "visiting" calls as it approached nest area
- 2 July, 21.45 - Male flew into nest cavity with prey, loud peeping of young inside nest hole, exited and perched on tree with head inside, then flew off
- 3 July, 21.00 - Female looking out of nest hole
- 4 July, 22.15 - Male calling softly and gently (visiting call) from regenerating spruce on west side of WT 1; female left nest at 22.30
- 5 July, 17.45 - Male "visiting" call from tree behind cabin, flew onto nest tree with prey, other bird inside took prey
- 7 July, 21.00 - Adult left nest cavity, flew away to SW of cabin
- 8 July, 17.00 - Female exited nest, than sat on close by tree, then re-entered cavity
- 12 July, 16.30 - Female stuck head out of hole and watched JF walk by on trail
- 13 July, 14.00 - Male left nest (after feeding?), flew over regeneration area, Winter Wren in regeneration, excited, loud alarm calls; 21.00 - Male in spruce in front of cabin, flew to WT 1 w/prey in talons, head into cavity, then flew to nearby small tree in regeneration area, perched there for 7 minutes, Winter Wren alarm calling and pestered owl by flying at it
- 14 July, 2100 - Male perched in spruce in front of cabin with prey, flew to nest hole, then into regenerating spruce and perched on branch overhanging trail at 3m ht., looking at observers and ignoring 2 Winter Wrens "buzzing" him
- 15 July, 20.30 - Adult and chick calling from within cavity
- 15 July, 22.30 - Adult "visiting" call as approached nest with prey, flew in to tree, then departed
- 17 July, 15.30 - Adult at WT 1, then perched in regeneration with Winter Wren and Hermit Thrush alarm calls and diving on owl
- 18 July, 14.30 - Adult feeding chick(s) within nest cavity
- 19 July, 21.00 - Chick looking out of nest hole
- 20 July, 15.00 - Chick looking out of nest hole; 20.30 - Adult feeding young in nest hole

21 July, 13.00 - Chick looking out of nest hole

22 July 22, 14.00 - Chick looking out of nest hole

23 July 23, 11.00 - Adult brought prey to nest and fed chick(s); 11.15 - Adult brought prey to nest and fed chick(s) (possibly second adult?); 20.00 - Chick looking out of nest hole

24 July 24, 15.00 - Chick looking out of nest hole; 22.30 - Adult gave "visiting" call and flew to nest tree with prey, observed feeding chick, chick peeping loudly.