

Conservation Corner

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Winter is here. And while many of us are moaning and groaning about the cold, wind, and snow, many birders are rejoicing. Winter, with its bare tree branches and snowy background, often provides the best chance to spot elusive and reclusive birds, including today's featured creature, the Northern Saw-whet Owl. Last week area naturalists met at the Nishna Bend Nature Center near Harlan to swap news and programs. Kristen Haynes, Ida County's new naturalist, related increased traffic at their headquarters as birders from around the Midwest and Canada flock to catch a glimpse of the Saw-whet owls overwintering in their park.

Saw-whets are one of nature's little guys, about the size of an American robin, and are found throughout North America. While they may remain in their breeding habitat year round, some also move south, including those in Ida County. Saw-whets are named for their rhythmic tooting song that reminded settlers of the sound of a whetstone sharpening a saw. They inhabit dense coniferous or mixed forests and nest in hollow trees including abandoned woodpecker holes.

Saw-whets use their sharp hearing and vision to catch small rodents, mostly deer mice. Their ears are of different shapes and vertically asymmetrical. In other words, one ear is higher and further forward than the other, which allows the owl to better pinpoint its prey. And even though Saw-whets are quite common, they are seldom seen. They even migrate at night. Have you seen or heard a Saw-whet in the wild?

In some Native American cultures, the Saw-whet also appears in the night sky where it helps teach the science lesson of circumpolar rotation of northern sky constellations. The lesson goes like this: The Great Bear awakes from hibernation, hungry and on the hunt. As she stalks her prey, Robin, Chickadee and His Cooking Pot, and Moose-Bird along with Saw-whet, Horned Owl, Blue Jay, and Pigeon chase the bear across the summer sky. By autumn the hunters are tired. Saw-whet is the first to drop out of the chase and disappear below the horizon line. The remaining hunters eventually wound the charging bear. Drops of her blood fall on Robin's feathers, turning his breast a bright red, while other

blood drops fall on the trees, turning their leaves bright red. Each winter the bear lies dead on her back. Each spring the bear spirit once again leaves her cave and travels across the sky, always pursued by the Bird Hunters.



Photo by Don Poggensee, Ida Grove

If you'd like a chance to spot a Saw-whet in the night sky, it's not too late to join us for Star-gazing with Conservation on Wed., January 28, at 5:30 p.m. in the Multi-Purpose Room of the Pocahontas Catholic School. Or, if you'd like a chance to spot a Saw-whet in a pine tree, join us on a day trip to Moorehead Park near Ida Grove. Save the date, February 10, and call 712-335-4395 for more information and to sign up.

Hope to see you on the hunt!