

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

By Marg Hendrick

Papers spread all over the diningroom table; at last I was going to catch up on some necessary paper work, a job that had been put off for a long time. Then the phone rang! Could I help with the banding of Northern Saw-whet Owls at Prince Edward Point near Picton tonight? I looked at the mess on the table, thought of the arrangements I would have to make and the logistics of getting ready in a short time for an unexpected night's work. My head said no, but my interest in owls screamed yes! Almost within the hour I left the house for the meeting place.

We arrived at Prince Edward Point just after dark and lit the propane lights in the cottage that serves as a banding station. That done, we hurried out to unfurl all 37 mist nets which are located in several different spots in the area. They are kept furred during the day to avoid song birds from becoming entangled. To unfurl a net one must remove the ties and then twirl it in the opposite direction from which it was wound. This is usually done with bare hands and the help of a miner's lamp (worn on the head) which keeps the hands free and enables one to focus the light where it is needed. The nets which are approximately 30 feet long are then raised to a height of about 6 feet. They are made in such a way that 3 tiers of horizontal pockets are formed. When the owl hits the net it falls into the pocket below and is usually unable to escape.

Now that the nets were ready we returned to the banding station. There we recorded the preliminary information - temperature, wind direction, etc. We poured ourselves a coffee and enjoyed the warmth of the mug as we cuddled it in our cold hands!

Back to the nets we went, complete with notebooks, pencils and numbered cloth bags. Sure enough, there were already some owls in the nets. We approached our captives quietly, and after ascertaining from which side they had flown in, proceeded to extricate them from that side. To try to do so from the other side would produce a badly tangled bird. To remove an owl from the net you usually try to get a firm hold on the legs first to help protect your fingers from the needle-like talons. Then working carefully, you first free the feet, then the wings and lastly the head. Once out, you pop the owl into a bag and then record the bag number, the time, the number of the net, the side where the bird flew in and the height at which it entered. After we had done all this we carried the owls back to the banding station.

There, each owl had to be banded, weighed, sexed and aged. Some birds were docile, others made clacking noises and struggled throughout the procedure. The birds are sexed by measuring the length of the wing chord. This is the length of the folded and unflattened wing from the most anterior part of the wrist joint to the tip of the longest primary feather. Without going into specific details, the female has the longer wing chord. By examining the wings it can be told if the owl hatched this year or in a previous one. "A hatching year bird (HY) is known to be in the first calendar year of life and is identified by uniformly coloured and unworn flight feathers. After hatching year (AHY) refers to any bird known to be in a calendar year after its first and is identified by the presence of two-tone coloured flight feathers - pale feathers and dark feathers." The above data were collected on each bird and then it was set free.

We again headed back to the nets to collect more owls, and the whole process was repeated several times during the night. With each trip to the nets we felt a little chillier and were not sorry when it came time to furl them just before dawn. A quick count told us that we had banded 29 owls. This was not a high total compared to the all time high of 181 banded the night of October 18, 19 in 1986, but it was enough to have made our trip worth it.

By the time the sun appeared on the horizon several cold, tired birders were on their way home. Upon reaching there, this tired birder looked at the mess still waiting on the diningroom table, and quickly decided that tomorrow would be another day because bed looked far more inviting!

The above banding project is sponsored by the Kingston Field Naturalists (KFN) and this is the 14th consecutive autumn it has taken place. By the end of the 1987 season a cumulative total of 4,648 Northern Saw-whet Owls had been banded. Much information has been obtained about the migratory patterns of this diminutive owl. Moreover, every effort has been expended to learn more from the data collected, and these results are published regularly in the KFN quarterly journal, "The Blue Bill".

The North Leeds Birdwatchers (NLB) enjoyed a field trip to Prince Edward Point where they saw a good selection of migrating raptors. There were 6 Turkey Vultures, 6 Sharp-shinned and 2 Cooper's Hawks, 1 Goshawk, 3 Red shouldered and 18 Red-tailed Hawks, 4 American Kestrels and 1 Peregrine Falcon as well as 14 buteos which remained

unidentified.

Canada Geese have been flying south and John Goodman counted 9 large skeins flying over his home on October 6. The Goodman's have also had White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows present at their feeder.

Rene Waterfield observed flocks of migrating Yellow-rumped Warblers at her place. In their fall plumage these warblers resemble small sparrows. However, they give the observer a good hint as to what they really are as they fly away showing bright yellow rumps. Rene also had 8 Eastern Bluebirds on October 16, some of which were checking out her nest boxes. This is something bluebirds frequently do in the fall.

The very light coloured Mallard that Frank Taylor observed earlier this year raised young during the summer. According to Frank she can still be seen on Sard Lake. Joe Langlois reported that the adult Common Loons have left his area but that

1 young bird still remains. Common Loons are only able to take off from the water so it will probably leave before the ice hems it in.

A gentleman, whose name I have been unable to recall, told me he had been able to approach a Turkey Vulture within a few feet as it fed on a dead raccoon near Lyndhurst.

Bill Cutfield reported the last Ruby-throated Hummingbird on September 20. Does anyone have a later date? If so, the NLB would like to have it for their records.

Annette Mess saw a Rusty Blackbird on October 11 and discovered a lingering Rufous-sided Towhee near Delta on October 14.

Most of the summer birds have left and will be replaced by our winter species. With the approach of winter they will flock to our feeders. Let me know what comes to yours. The number to call with your sightings is 359-5178 and until next month GOOD BIRDING!





**The Best Time
To Call Your
Heating
Oil Dealer
Is When
You
Don't
Need
Him**

**Is your
furnace
up to par?**

Call us now and we can tell you how many \$\$\$ you can save on next year's heating bills!!

We Offer:

1. Parts plan to fit every budget
2. 24-hour emergency service.
3. Fuel payment plans.
4. Complete line of high efficiency furnaces and burners.

**Make your
appointment today!**

DOUG SUMMERS FUELS

A Division of Universal Terminals Ltd.
Heating and Air Conditioning
Elgin, Ont. K0G 1E0

Office
359-5080

Toll Free
1-800-267-8187