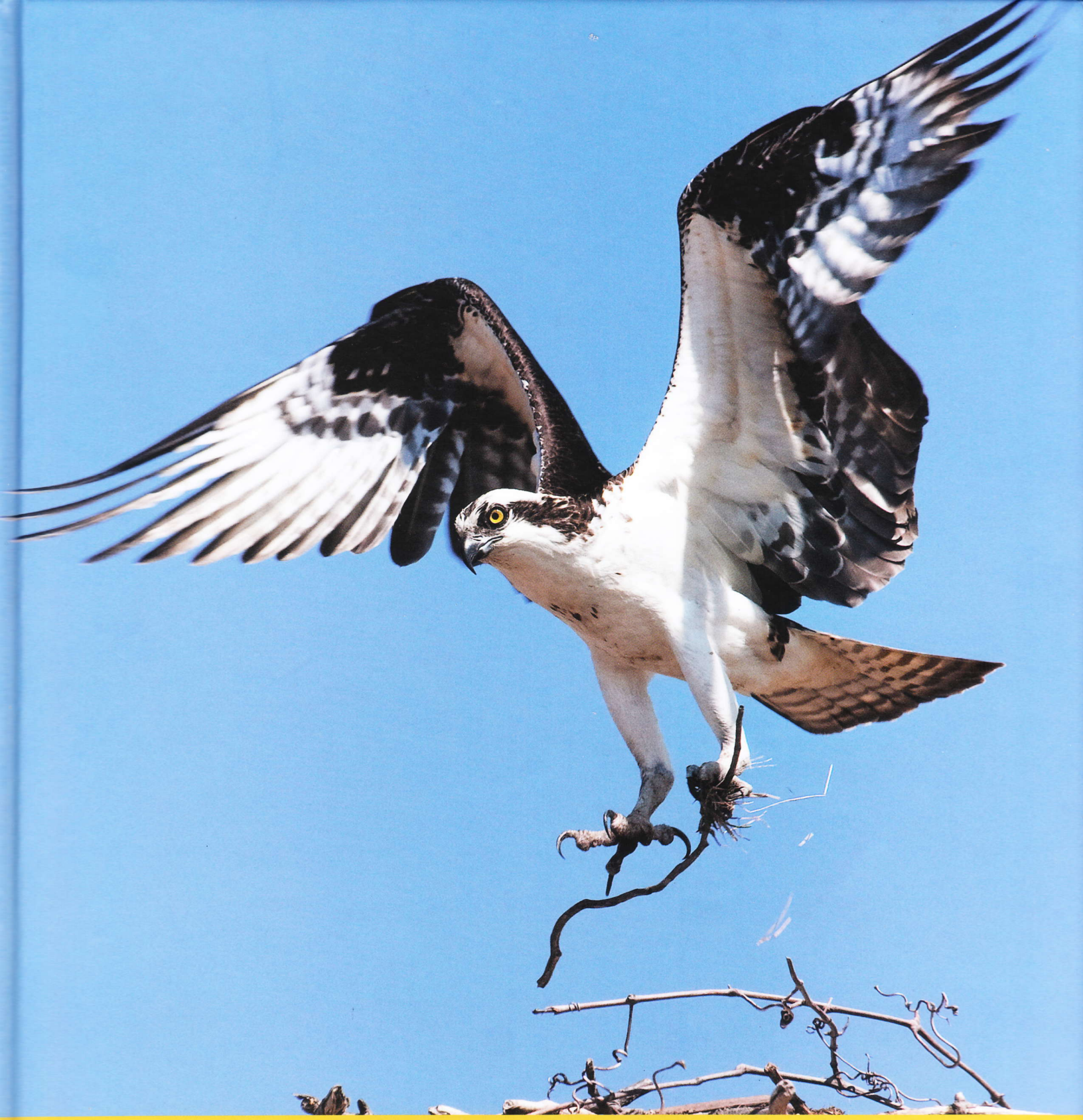


2nd ATLAS *of the* BREEDING BIRDS *of* MARYLAND *and the* DISTRICT *of* COLUMBIA

Edited by WALTER G. ELLISON

Foreword by Chandler S. Robbins

Northern Saw-whet Owl

Aegolius acadicus

George M. Jett

Northern Saw-whet Owls, the smallest species of owl that breeds in Maryland, are among the most charming bird species to inhabit the state, their large yellow eyes capturing the attention of virtually any observer fortunate enough to locate one. While relatively rare in Maryland, they are common but seldom-observed birds in forested areas of the northern tier of the United States and across boreal Canada (Godfrey 1986; Cannings 1993). As nearby as Pennsylvania they are a widely dispersed uncommon breeding owl (http://bird.atlasing.org/Atlas/PA/; D. Gross, pers. comm.). Saw-whet owls breed in West Virginia, Virginia, and North Carolina in the higher elevations of the central and southern Appalachian Mountains (Simpson and Range 1974; Buckelew and Hall 1994; Trollinger and Reay 2001). Northern populations are highly migratory and during the winter saw-whet owls can be found in nonbreeding habitats as far south as northern Florida (Lesser and Stickley 1967). They regularly winter in the Piedmont and Coastal Plain provinces of Maryland.

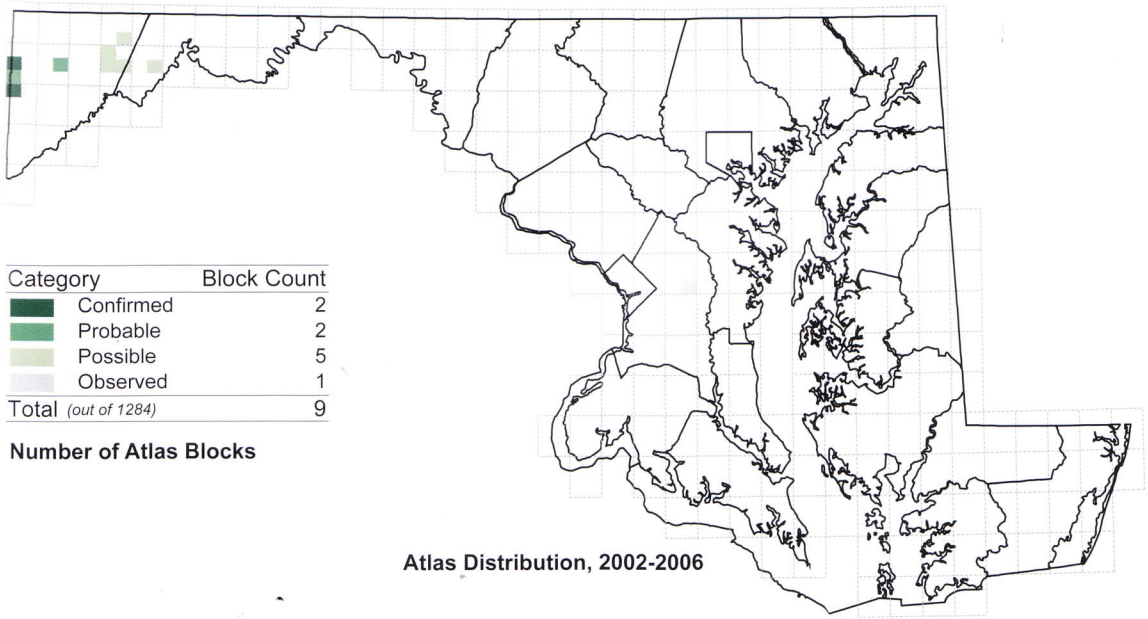
In early March, Northern Saw-whet Owls begin singing on breeding territories in the conifer wetlands of Garrett County (D. Brinker and K. Dodge, unpubl. data). These small owls frequent forests with dense understory structure that offers security from predation by larger owls. They are most often found in conifer swamps, alder wetlands, areas of dense eastern hemlock, or hardwood forest habitats with a thick understory of rhododendron and/or mountain laurel as well as in red spruce forests at higher elevations south of Maryland. Northern Saw-whet Owls are secondary cavity nesters most often found using old flicker or Pileated Woodpecker cavities or natural cavities formed in broken tree limbs (Cannings 1993). They will readily use nest boxes that are available in the appropriate habitats.

When the 1983–1987 atlas was conducted, there had been no confirmed nests of Northern Saw-whet Owls in Maryland (Jeschke and Brinker 1996). The first confirmed nest was located on 23 April 1993 in a nest box placed specifically for saw-whet owls in the southern portion of Cranesville Swamp (Brinker and Dodge 1993). From 1993 through 2008 nine additional nests were recorded in Garrett County (D. Brinker and K. Dodge, unpubl. data). Maryland egg dates range from 11 April through 20 May (D. Brinker and K. Dodge, unpubl. data), with most observations of eggs occurring during late April when nest boxes are traditionally checked for the first time each season. Chick dates range from 12 May through 22 June, with most dates in mid- to late May (D. Brinker and K. Dodge, unpubl. data). In these same nest boxes clutch and brood sizes have ranged from two to five. Chicks begin fledging during late May and are dependent on their parents for food for at least a month thereafter. An adult male and chick were mist netted together in an occupied breeding territory on 30 June 1992 near Cunningham Swamp (Brinker and Dodge 1993).

Saw-whet owls are infrequent breeders in Garrett County and although undocumented by either atlas effort, they may be very rare irregular breeders at higher elevations as far east as Washington and western Frederick counties. During the first atlas Northern Saw-whet Owls were found in 3 atlas blocks but were not confirmed as breeding in any block (Jeschke and Brinker 1996). The increase in natural history information available for saw-whet owls since the first atlas project may have helped increase their detection in the second atlas. The 2002–2006 atlas found evidence of breeding Northern Saw-whet Owls in a total of 9 blocks, with 2 confirmed records and 1 additional block where the species was observed. Both confirmed records were from nest boxes in Cranesville Swamp. One atlas record (1 of only 2 probable records) was of an adult Northern Saw-whet Owl in a woodpecker cavity in a lone white pine snag located in a clear-cut in Garrett State Forest. This owl was first noticed in the cavity on 7 April 2006; it was observed in the cavity entrance for several weeks thereafter (D. Brinker, unpubl. data). For Northern Saw-whet Owls the increased number and distribution of confirmed atlas blocks is misleading and probably does not reflect a significant change in the Maryland breeding population of this species between the first and second atlases. Since the first atlas there has been one additional observation of a juvenile Northern Saw-whet Owl on Catoctin Mountain, a fledged individual photographed by Jim McGibney (pers. comm.).

Northern Saw-whet Owls have now been adequately documented as regular, but rare, breeding birds in western Maryland. Atlas efforts will probably never provide enough data on saw-whet owl populations to assess population trends, although when sufficient nocturnal effort is part of a project, an atlas project can provide insight into the extent of the owls' normal breeding range. As long as western Maryland retains adequate forest cover with associated snags, healthy populations of primary cavity excavators, and healthy conifer swamps, Northern Saw-whet Owls may remain a rare breeding species in Maryland. But with the potential loss of hemlock cover to hemlock wooly adelgids and the possibility that global climate change will significantly warm the higher elevations of Garrett County, Maryland may eventually lose one of its most charming bird species, the Northern Saw-whet Owl. Only time will tell.

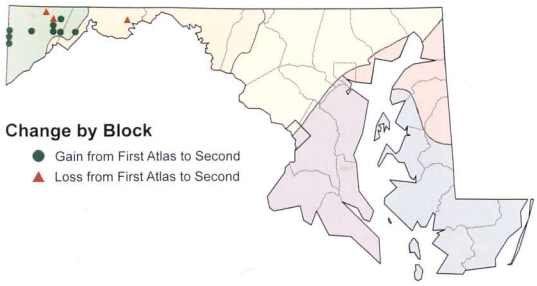
DAVID F. BRINKER



Category	Block Count
Confirmed	2
Probable	2
Possible	5
Observed	1
Total *(out of 1284)*	9

Number of Atlas Blocks

Atlas Distribution, 2002-2006



Change in Atlas Distribution, 1983-1987 to 2002-2006

Atlas Region	1983-1987	2002-2006	Change No.	Change %
Allegheny Mountain	2	9	+7	+350%
Ridge and Valley	1	0	-1	-100%
Piedmont	0	0	0	-
Upper Chesapeake	0	0	0	-
Eastern Shore	0	0	0	-
Western Shore	0	0	0	-
Totals	3	9	+6	+200%

Change in Total Blocks between Atlases by Region