

central and southern Panhandle, one was at a Scotts Bluff Co feeder 19-20 May (KD).

Dickcissel: Large numbers were noted as far west as Lincoln Co 22 May in hayfields near Pawnee Slough (TJW); such numbers are unusual early in summer.

Bobolink: Record early, on 20 Apr, was a male at Platte River Whooping Crane Trust, Hall Co; it was a color-banded male, probably hatched in 2004 (DK). Large numbers, including a count of 50, were in hayfields near Pawnee Slough in Lincoln Co 22 May (TJW), they were seen "by the gross" (at least 144?) in Butler Co 22 May (LR,RH), and were "everywhere" in Custer and Valley Cos 24 May (TJW).

Red-winged Blackbird: A flock of immature males was seen in southeast Nebraska 13 Mar; adult males were on territory and no females were seen (WRS).

Eastern Meadowlark: First singing birds were in Sarpy Co 17 Mar (CNK). As many as 30 were found in the meadows east of North Platte 21 Apr (TJW), and 5 singing males around Diamond Bar L, McPherson Co, 7 Apr were surrounded by "uncountable" Western Meadowlarks (TJW). This species occurs in suitable wet meadow habitat throughout the Sandhills. Strangely, it is essentially only a rare spring migrant in the eastern RWB, where permanent damp meadows are uncommon, particularly those consisting of cool weather species; one was at Harvard Marsh 22 May (JGJ).

(Jorgensen, <http://rip.physics.unk.edu/NOU/eRWBbirdlistJGJPDF.pdf>)

Western Meadowlark: Routine reports.

Yellow-headed Blackbird: Routine reports.

Rusty Blackbird: Rare westward, 30-35 were in Lincoln Co 14 Mar and 2 were there 2 Apr (TJW).

Brewer's Blackbird: Rare in the east, 3 were in Butler Co 22 Apr (MB) and 20 were there 23 Apr (D&JP).

Common Grackle: Routine reports.

Great-tailed Grackle: Best counts were 150-200 in Lincoln Co 21 Apr (TJW) and 37 at Chilibaba Ponds, Scotts Bluff Co, 17 Apr (KD), indicating the increasing numbers being seen westward; reports are now regular throughout the Platte River Valley. Sandhills reports are still few; 2 were in Logan Co 15 May (SJD,AB) and one was at CLNWR 16 May (SJD,AB). Females were carrying nest material in Scotts Bluff Co 17 Apr (KD) and in David City 1 May (LR,RH).

Brown-headed Cowbird: Routine reports.

Orchard Oriole: Routine Reports.

Baltimore Oriole: The lure of grape jelly was shown when 15 were banded in a Bellevue yard in 4 hours on 19 May (RG).

Bullock's Oriole: Routine Reports.

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch: None were reported; departure is in early Mar.

Purple Finch: Last in the east were 4 birds in Bellevue, 2 each at different feeders, on 2 Apr (ARy,KCR). Rare in the Panhandle, "a few" at a feeder in Sidney lingered until 1 May (AS).

House Finch: Routine reports.

Red Crossbill: Easterly reports were of 3 at BOL 20 Mar-17 Apr (LE,D&JP), a female at PL 26 Mar (D&JP,E&JM) and 12 at Kearney 10 Apr (fide LR,RH). A mixed-age flock of up to 50 attended the feeders at Wildcat Hills NC during May (AK,KD,AR), and 4 were at Bushnell Cem 17 May (SJD,AB).

Common Redpoll: The only reports were of one at a Burwell feeder 4-5 Mar (LR,RH) and 3 attending an Omaha feeder through 6 Mar (NR).

Pine Siskin: This species was widespread this spring, although not in huge numbers, remaining into May at several locations, and apparently nesting at possibly 4 locations outside the usual breeding range. Such extra-limital nestings are initiated very early, and the fledged birds and adults are usually gone by Jun. Fitting this pattern were birds carrying nest material (horsehair) at Ericson L, Wheeler Co, 19 Mar (LR,RH) and a pair "generally acting domestic", one reportedly carrying nest material, at Louisville Lakes SRA, Cass Co, 26 Mar (fide RW). A female with a brood patch was seen in Bellevue Cem 19 May (CNK), and a nest with 3 young was found among "several nests" at Sidney 15 May (AS); 10-15 birds were still present at Sidney 18 May and 2 on 29 May (AS). Last report away from the usual breeding range was one in Dixon Co 27 May (JJ), and best count 50 south of Gering 11 Apr (AK).

American Goldfinch: Routine reports.

Evening Grosbeak: The only report was a female at the Wildcat Hills NC feeders 15 May (AR).

House Sparrow: Routine reports.

NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWLS: RARE OR OVERLOOKED? AN EXAMPLE FROM THE CENTRAL PLATTE VALLEY

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INTRODUCTION

Assessing the population status for species requires accurate measures of local or regional numbers. For many species, standardized protocols exist for estimating local numbers through visual counts (e.g., Breeding Bird Survey routes, Christmas Bird Count circles, and point count protocols used by the U.S. Forest Service). For many raptor species, monitoring populations at migratory bottlenecks such as the Goshute Mountains, NV, Hawk Mountain, PA, and Cape May, NJ, provide yearly indices of population health. Unfortunately, most monitoring protocols overlook a suite of small crepuscular or nocturnal species. Project OwlNet (www.projectowl.net.org) is a volunteer-based network of banding stations focusing on Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) migration in the eastern part of the United States and Canada. Information collected by Project OwlNet volunteer groups reveals that this small owl appears to be far more common than previously thought.

METHODS

I set up a banding station at the Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust in Hall County. I placed three 12 x 3 m, 60mm mesh nets in a "T" formation

in a small opening within a patch of gallery forest comprised of Eastern Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) and Eastern Redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*). I used a Jimmy Stewart game caller with a continuous loop tape of a Northern Saw-whet Owl "advertisement call" played at approximately 90 dB (Cannings 1993, Whalen and Watts 1999). Station operation started 8 October and continued sporadically through 11 Dec 2004. Nets were open from dusk until 0200 – 0400 the following morning. Net checks occurred at least every 40 minutes, more often in cold temperatures. All owls were identified to species. Sex and age were assigned using unflattened wing chord, body mass, and molt pattern as described by Pyle (1997) and Brinker (personal comm.). All owls were banded with a USGS leg band and released within 25 minutes of capture.



Northern Saw-whet Owls. Photo courtesy of Daniel Kim.

RESULTS

I operated the station a total of 14 nights for approximately 370 net hours. I captured 16 owls: 14 Northern Saw-whet Owls and 2 Eastern Screech-Owls (*Megascops asio*). Of the 14 Northern Saw-whet Owls, 10 were females and 4 were undetermined sex, while age composition was 4 hatch-year birds, 6 second-year birds, and 4 after-second-year birds (Table 1). Peak captures occurred on 11-12 November, when 9 birds were caught on two nights.

DISCUSSION

The capture bias towards female, after-hatch-year birds displayed in Nebraska is consistent with banding stations in the southeastern United States. Owl banding stations in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic regions display variable sex and age

capture rates (Brinker et al. 1997). Capture rates are female-biased (69-96 %) at all stations in eastern and mid-Atlantic regions, with the sex-ratio bias increasing from north to south. The percent of after-hatch-year individuals increased from north to south, but was highly variable among years at all stations (Brinker et al. 1997). Northern Saw-whet Owls are considered uncommon regular winter residents throughout the eastern part of Nebraska (Sharpe et al. 2001), yet only three Christmas Bird Count circles have ever recorded saw-whets (Lincoln, Omaha, and Lake McConaughy) during eight of 95 years with count circle data from Nebraska (National Audubon Society 2005). There are a couple of explanations for the dearth of CBC sightings. First, Northern Saw-whet Owls may not occur in Nebraska every year, as the number of migrating individuals relates to vole populations, resulting in "irruption" years when vole numbers crash in the northern forests, forcing northern owl species to move south in great numbers (Cheveau et al. 2004). Second, these small owls display little winter site fidelity and are not reliably found in the same areas over a series of winters (Marks and Doremus 2000). However, the most likely explanation is that these are small, secretive owls that remain undetected with passive survey methods.

Table 1. Capture data for 14 Northern Saw-whet Owls from Hall County, Nebraska. Date refers to date at time of sunset; therefore, captures occurring after 2359 hours correspond to the next calendar day.

| Date | Time | Sex | Age | Wing chord (mm) | Weight (g) |
|-------------|------|---------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| 27 October | 0230 | Female | Second-year | 136 | 98 |
| 6 November | 2300 | Female | Hatch-year | 141 | 96 |
| 11 November | 2220 | Female | Third-year | 143 | 100 |
| 11 November | 2120 | Female | Second-year | 139 | 90 |
| 11 November | 2220 | Female | Second-year | 142 | 92 |
| 11 November | 1940 | Female | Hatch-year | 142 | 102 |
| 11 November | 1940 | Female | Hatch-year | 140 | 90 |
| 11 November | 1940 | Female | Hatch-year | 134 | 96 |
| 12 November | 1920 | Female | After second-year | 140 | 90 |
| 20 November | 0200 | Female | After second-year | 142 | 86 |
| Average | | | | 139.9 | 94 |
| 28 October | 2130 | Unknown | Second-year | 139 | 84 |
| 6 November | 0030 | Unknown | After second-year | 135 | 86 |
| 12 November | 2120 | Unknown | Second-year | 136 | 86 |
| 12 November | 2120 | Unknown | Second-year | 136 | 86 |
| Average | | | | 136.5 | 85.5 |

CONCLUSION

Any comparisons made between one year of banding data from Nebraska and multiple studies from the East are tenuous at best. While all stations display female-biased capture rates, annual changes to percent of juvenile/adult captured in eastern populations preclude inferences from a single year of data from one banding station Nebraska. Banding stations throughout the Northeast are associated with local nature centers, and new stations in other regions like Nebraska could provide additional data on Northern Saw-whet Owl migratory patterns and winter distributions. In addition to a nature center staff member, locations near Lincoln and Omaha could draw upon a volunteer core of local birders and college students to run banding stations during weekends. Standardized protocols are available at the Project OwlNet website.

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LEAST TERN AND PIPING PLOVER SURVEYS OF THE CENTRAL AND UPPER PLATTE RIVER 2001-2004

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Central Platte Natural Resources District (Central Platte NRD), Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) and Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District (Central) have been involved in monitoring and management of interior Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) and Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) nesting habitat along the Platte River and on the shores of Lake McConaughy in Nebraska since the late 1980s. Since 2001, Central Platte NRD, NPPD and Central have also helped implement the Least Tern and Piping Plover monitoring protocol developed by the Technical Advisory Committee of the Platte River Endangered Species Partnership (PRES P) (PRES P 2002a, an earlier version of the protocol used in 2001). PRES P is an organization created under a 1997 "Cooperative Agreement for Platte River Research and other Efforts Relating to Endangered Species Habitats Along the Central Platte River, Nebraska", among the states of Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming and the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Study Area and Methods

The survey efforts reported here focused on the central and upper Platte River valley between North Platte and Chapman, Nebraska, including surveys of riverine sandbar, constructed nesting island and sandpit habitats. River sandbar and constructed nesting island surveys were conducted by airboat and on foot. Sandpits were accessed by vehicle or on foot. Observations were made from a distance sufficient not to disturb the birds, using binoculars and spotting scopes.

The PRES P protocol design we utilized is described in detail in PRES P (2002a) and consists of two principal components: 1) an effort-based survey, and 2) a survey of historic nesting areas and nesting areas on sandpits and constructed islands. The PRES P monitoring efforts were implemented on the Lexington to Chapman reach of the Platte. Using this same basic study protocol, Central also monitored a managed nesting site at their diversion dam near North Platte, Nebraska, and sandpits along the Platte River from Lexington to North Platte over the same time period. Central Platte NRD conducted sandpit monitoring between Kearney and Chapman, Nebraska, and NPPD surveyed sandpits and constructed nesting islands between Lexington and Kearney. Between 23 and 28 sandpits and 3 or 4 constructed nesting islands were surveyed annually over the survey period.