

An Old Northern Saw-whet Owl Nesting Record from Southeast Minnesota

Karla A. Kinstler

In the summer of 2007, Arlayne Fremling of Winona told me about a brood of Northern Saw-whet Owls (*Aegolius acadicus*) she and her husband, Winona State University Professor Emeritus of Biology Dr. Cal Fremling, raised in their garage in the mid-1980s. The Fremlings provided photographs and slides to verify that these owls were indeed Northern Saw-whets. Although the exact date of the nesting was not recorded, a slide of the adult in the nest box is dated March 1986.

Dr. Fremling recalled the following details about the nesting:

The owls nested in a Wood Duck house approximately 15 feet above the ground in a black cherry tree about 50 feet behind their house in Gilmore Valley, just outside the city of Winona in Winona County. The tree was at the edge of a hardwood lot with a row of Norway pines on a steep, east-facing slope, with the nest box entrance hole also facing east. Each time Dr. Fremling walked under the tree and knocked on it, a saw-whet owl would pop its head out of the entrance hole of the nest box. Despite the proximity to their house, the Fremlings never heard the owls vocalize.

One day, the Fremlings' golden retriever came home with a dead adult saw-whet owl in its mouth. Not knowing at that time that both adults will feed the young, they assumed the owlets in the nest box were orphaned and starving. They received verbal permission from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to raise the owlets, which they did in their garage.

The four owlets were fed mice and ground beef mixed with feathers. They were so tame Dr. Fremling took them to several area grade schools for educational purposes.

Their orange breasts and bright white "eyebrow" markings served as camouflage even in the garage. Dr. Fremling recalls not being able to locate one of the owlets one day. He searched and searched until he finally noticed it on a shelf, blending in easily between cans of spray paint.

When the owlets began to fly well, the Fremlings released them by opening the garage door to allow them to leave on their own and offered food in the garage until they no longer came back to eat it.

No other birds of any kind were observed nesting in this Wood Duck box either before or after the saw-whet owls.

Cannings (1993) shows southeast Minnesota as part of the year-round range of the Northern Saw-whet Owl, but notes that the limits of breeding and non-breeding birds aren't accurately known and are likely to vary from year to year.

Roberts (1932) wrote that Northern Saw-whet Owls were "a permanent resident, breeding throughout the state, including the groves on the prairies." Janssen (1987) considered them to occur rarely in southeastern Minnesota during the summer season, noting that breeding season observations have been made in Winona County (such as Johnson 1981), but breeding behavior had not been documented.

The most southern documented nesting records of the Northern Saw-whet Owl in Minnesota have occurred in the Twin Cities metro region: Hennepin County (Hitman 1988, Kessen and Svingen 2007), Ramsey County (Campbell 1978), and Washington County (Hertzel 1999). The Winona County nest described in this paper is approximately 100 miles southeast of these records, making it by far the most southern nesting record in the state of Minnesota.



Northern Saw-whet Owl chicks, spring 1986, Gilmore Valley, Winona County. Photos by Arlayne Fremling.

John Idzikowski considers the current breeding range of Northern Saw-whet Owls in Wisconsin to be essentially north of a line from northern Brown County to the west (pers. comm.). There are two nest records from south of this line before 1900: one in Jefferson County and another in Sauk County (Robbins 1991). The most recent southern Wisconsin nest observation is from Fred Leshner who has a record of two dead and four live young saw-whet owls found in a nest cavity in a tree that was cut down 29 May 1970 in Montello, Marquette County, Wisconsin (pers. comm.). This location would be nearly due east, but slightly south, of Winona, Minnesota.

The Iowa Ornithologists Union has no nest records for this species, but Kent and Dinsmore (1996) cite two records when saw-whet owls were heard calling in Allamakee County in northeast Iowa in May 1988.

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19268 Perkins Valley Drive, Houston, MN 55943.