

## NOTEWORTHY BREEDING RECORDS OF THE NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL IN THE CRESTON VALLEY, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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The Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*), primarily a nocturnal species, is an uncommon to fairly common local spring and autumn migrant and a rare to irregular resident across southern British Columbia (Cannings 1987 and 1993, Campbell et al. 1990). Butler et al. (1986) considered it to be rare in the Creston valley with seven records for the winter, spring, and summer periods and no nesting records. Although the Northern Saw-whet Owl has been found breeding in the West Kootenay (Campbell et al. 1990; Jakob Dulisse and Vanessa Johnson pers. comm.), nesting information is lacking for the Creston valley. In this note we describe two recent breeding occurrences.

On 16 April 2006, while driving a rural road in the Lister district on the east side of the Creston valley, Marcia Long spotted large woodpecker cavities in a trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) snag. While her husband Tom prepared to “tap” the tree trunk, Marcia stood ready with her camera and was surprised when a Northern Saw-whet Owl peered out (Figure 1). The abdominal feathers of the owl appeared ruffled, suggesting incubation or brooding, and when subsequent visits repeated this response, it became evident that the cavity was being used for nesting.

The aspen snag was situated at the edge of a coniferous stand of trees, primarily Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and western larch (*Larix occidentalis*) (Figure 2). The broken snag was 9.7 m (32 ft) in height and 48 cm (19 in) in diameter at breast height (dbh). There were seven cavities in the snag, of which two were found occupied; one by the Northern Saw-whet Owl 7 m (23 ft) from the ground, and another by a Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) 7.3 m (24 ft) from the ground.

On 12 May 2006, Marcia observed one well-



**Figure 1.** An adult Northern Saw-whet Owl peering out of nest cavity in Lister, BC. 16 April 2006 (Marcia Long). BC Photo 3530a.

feathered young looking out of the cavity, but on 13 May, after sitting patiently for three hours, she was rewarded when two young peered out of the cavity opening at 1815 hrs (Figure 3). The young were well-feathered and the older of the two was well developed and appeared close to fledging. The owls were not seen again after 16 May 2006.

The site was checked in the spring of 2007 but there was no evidence of activity. Cannings (1993) notes that cleaned nest boxes may be used in successive years, but not by the same birds and that the hard mat of dried prey remains in a natural cavity may make the site unsuitable for a couple of years.

On 6 April 2007, Linda Van Damme, while



**Figure 2.** A trembling aspen snag with old woodpecker cavities. Lister, BC. 21 April 2006. (Linda M. Van Damme). BC Photo 3530b.



**Figure 3.** Two Northern Saw-whet Owl young peering out of cavity in Lister, BC. 13 May 2006 (Marcia Long). BC Photo 3530c.

investigating tree cavities in the Boulder Creek area, “tapped” on a live black cottonwood tree (*Populus balsamifera*) and was delighted to see an adult Northern Saw-whet Owl appear at the opening to a cavity (Figure 4). The cavity was an old excavated woodpecker hole at a junction where a branch had broken off. The owl’s upper body filled the hole, thus hiding the abdominal feathers which offer a clue as to incubating and/or brooding activity. On subsequent visits the adult appeared each time at the entrance of the cavity when the tree trunk was lightly “tapped”.

The black cottonwood nest tree was located in a mixed coniferous-deciduous forest comprised of western redcedar (*Thuja plicata*), western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*), western larch, western yew (*Taxus brevifolia*), and Douglas maple (*Acer glabrum*). This live cottonwood tree was 26 m (85 ft) in height with a dbh of 51 cm (20 in) and the cavity occupied by the Northern Saw-whet Owl was the only one visible at 13.7 m (45 ft) from the ground.



**Figure 4.** An adult Northern Saw-whet Owl peering from a cavity in a black cottonwood tree at Boulder Creek, BC. 21 April 2007 (Linda M. Van Damme). BC Photo 3531a.

The site was visited on 20 May 2006 at 2035 hrs and the tree was “*not tapped*”. The adult flew from the cavity at 2100 hrs and was observed in silhouette as the shadows of dusk had fallen upon the forest. Eight minutes later (2108 hrs) the adult returned, carrying prey in its talons and entered the cavity. There was no further activity and we departed the site at 2120 hrs as darkness hindered any further observations.

Marcia visited the site on 1 June 2006 at which time she observed two well-feathered young at the cavity. However, on 5 June, when Linda visited the nest tree, only one young was active at the cavity. The young owl had obviously heard the approaching footsteps, as it was peering out of the cavity when Linda looked up. The site was not visited again until 11 June and as there was no activity; it is likely the young owls had fledged.

The Northern Saw-whet Owl is now recognized as a breeding species in the Creston valley. Since 2002, the following species have been added to the breeding avifauna: Western Screech-Owl (*Megascops kennicotti macfarlanei*; Beaucher and Dulisse 2004), Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*; Van Damme 2004), Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*; Van Damme et al. 2006), Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*; Wildlife Data Centre), and Spruce Grouse (*Falcapennis canadensis*; L. Van Damme and M. Long pers. obs.)

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