

**NOTEWORTHY BREEDING RECORDS OF
THE NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL IN
CASTLEGAR, BRITISH COLUMBIA**

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The Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) is not an uncommon bird in British Columbia although it is not often seen due to its small size and nocturnal lifestyle. It breeds mainly along the coast, including larger offshore islands, locally in the southern Peace River region, and south of Prince George throughout the interior of the province (Campbell et al. 1990).

Although the species is present year-round in the West Kootenay area active nest sites are difficult to find, and none had been documented in the vicinity of Castlegar.

On the evening of 26 May 2006, at 2100 hrs, I

observed a family of Northern Saw-whet Owls in the trees along Columbia River in the vicinity of Zuckerberg Island in Castlegar (Figure 1). There were five fledglings giving buzzy begging calls while perched low on lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *latifolia*) branches, occasionally making short flights of up to six metres from one pine to another. All of the young stayed within 12 metres of the riparian black cottonwoods (*Populus balsamifera*) where I suspect the nest cavity is located. The family of owls remained in this general area for three to four days, and then was often observed about 100 metres north of that site in a stand of lodgepole pine trees along the Columbia River. By the first of June, I observed them taking short flights east across a small back channel with a span of about 80 metres to Zuckerberg Island. I also observed them flying a distance of about 200 metres across a small bay from their usual perching lodgepole pines to a point of land jutting into the river.



Figure 1. One of the five fledged Northern Saw-whet Owls found on Zuckerberg Island in Castlegar, BC on 26 May 2006 (Vanessa Johnson). BC Photo 3614a.

The owlets could frequently be heard calling on Zuckerberg Island, with one owlet in particular tending to stay in a clump of cottonwoods on the eastern side of the island. This owlet could be easily identified by its distinctive begging call of two short

buzzes instead of the longer single buzz the other owlets used.

I last observed the owlets on the night of 3 June on Zuckerberg Island. The parents seemed to still be feeding the owlet with the two short buzzes, as I would hear that call, then a parent would fly into the tree where the owlet was perched. There was a brief silence, then the parent would fly off again and the owlet resumed calling. When the other owlets gave their single-buzz begging calls one or both of the adults would barrel into the trees, or brush, where it was and drive it out, with much thrashing of branches and indignant squeaking. One owlet flew off and was pursued a short distance (though I couldn't really see how far) before the adult turned back to go after a different owlet. Not once did I observe the adults going after the one with the two-buzz call. I suspected the adults were trying to chase the owlets away, as it was time for them to be independent. After that night I neither heard nor saw any saw-whet owls in the area until May of the next year.

At 2030 hrs on 21 May 2007, I observed four Northern Saw-whet Owl fledglings in the same location as the previous year's encounter, perched in young lodgepole pine trees and various domestic shrubs. They were giving begging calls, although no adults were seen in the vicinity that evening. Some of the fledglings were attempting short flights of about four metres between shrubs, while others preferred hopping or climbing through the underbrush to flying. At least one of the fledglings appeared unable to fly; instead, it would glide across short spans of about two metres, climbing up the branches to gain height. Although I saw an adult Northern Saw-whet Owl in this location on 1 June, I did not see or hear the owlets again.

The habitat occupied by the breeding Northern Saw-whet Owls along the Columbia River consisted of a few scattered black cottonwoods merging into a fairly open lodgepole pine stand with mixed shrubby vegetation forming a moderately dense underbrush (Figure 2). There are also several open lawns and unmaintained grassy areas within 20 metres of the probable nest site where prey such as mice and large insects may be plentiful. The nearby Zuckerberg Island has an open mixed forest of mature deciduous and coniferous trees, including black cottonwood,



Figure 2. The nesting habitat along the Columbia River near Castlegar, BC where the fledgling Northern Saw-whet Owls were observed in 2006 and 2007, consisted of second growth mixed woods with scattered black cottonwoods and dense shrubby understory vegetation. 30 August 2007 (Vanessa Johnson). BC Photo 3614b.

lodgepole pine, western yew (*Taxus brevifolia*), western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*), and Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*). Several conifers and cottonwoods on Zuckerberg Island, and along the river, have been used successfully as nesting trees by other species, including Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) and Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*).

According to Cannings (1993), the average clutch size of the Northern Saw-whet Owl in British Columbia is 5.67 eggs with an average of 3.46 fledged young per nest. This successful site has fledged slightly above the average number of young in at least two successive seasons.

Hopefully the owls will stay in the area and continue to raise their young. The owls seem unperturbed by people on the trail, and the 2006 owlets would sometimes follow me along the trail, and perch above me, so I was able to get good looks at all of them.

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About the Author

Vanessa is currently a pre-veterinary student at the University of Lethbridge, AB, and has been involved in birding for the past 10 years.

