

“Finding Owls” Field Workshop—Final Report  
February 18, 2017  
Jay Sheppard, leader

Weather was unusual for this time of year. We had no deep snow drifts with which to contend! Perfect weather, actually. Temperature at dawn was in the high 40s and peaked in mid-afternoon near 70°. Sunset was at 5:50.

Because of the high numbers of pre-registrants, the day was divided into two sessions: 9:30 AM and 1:00 PM. Forty pre-registered; 21 attended the morning session and 19 attended the afternoon session; four attended both sessions, incl. me. Several who had pre-registered did not attend. The handouts had included a key to owl pellets in the mid-Atlantic region, how to find owls, and an illustrated “guide” to what Saw-whets look like hiding in the pines.

Both sessions started with a general discussion of owl roosting and feeding requirements, which were part of the main emphasis of the handouts and the whole workshop. Also discussed were the ecological differences in some of the rodents that owls (and other raptors) feed upon. Saw-whet and long-ear pellets were passed around, including some of the skull fragments found within several of the pellets. Vole runways were exposed, as the groups walked towards the pines. We proceeded into the pines with the novices following around several of the experienced ‘owlers’ who volunteered to help. Within minutes of entering pines everyone was finding pellets and whitewash. I was very impressed with how quickly most of the participants learned what we were looking for and found the evidence of an owl having been present.

Prior to the workshop, I and several others had found both Long-eared and Saw-whets in the immediate area where we were searching. We actually had a Saw-whet on Friday, the day before this event. So on Saturday we all proceeded to where that owl was found and diligently searched for several hundred feet in all directions from the now vacant roost site. We all found more pellets but no fresh whitewash/droppings. We did find a Barred Owl sleeping in the pines near the parking lot, but that turned out to be the only owl the morning group found by the time we finally stopped at Noon.

The afternoon session was a near repeat of the morning. We covered more of the usual white pines that the owls usually preferred. Many more pellets were also found. All told we likely found close to 35 or 40 pellets in the white pines this day. Certainly ample evidence of the use of the pines by the owls. Both fresh pellets of Long-eared and Saw-whets were found, mostly the latter. As we walked out of the main search area, I diverted the group towards where the Barred Owl had been in the morning. It had moved in the interim. It was close to 4 PM when we found the Barred Owl hunting from a low perch on the edge of the pines, not far from the parking lot. As the sun was low and to the other side of the owl, I directed everyone around the bird to get better light for any photographs.

While most were snapping pictures, one of our party, Ann Finneran, looked down and found a very fresh pellet that was still very wet. Looking up, there was a Saw-whet hugging the trunk of the pine! This pine is a hybrid (loblolly × pitch) that dominates the landscape in this part

of the park, but is not regularly used by the Saw-whets—as evidenced over the years by a near total lack of pellets. To my knowledge this is only the third one found in these pines over the past 20+ years.

So the slight detour to search for the Barred Owl at the very end of the afternoon session yielded not only that owl but a second! Total luck!!! But then, that is what birding is all about! It would probably take well over 75 or even a hundred trained birders to completely search the entire pine plantation at Annapolis Rock in a day. I have no actual measurements, but they must encompass over 75 acres and likely over 100 acres of parkland. Thus, we have had to focus where we find the most evidence of owl usage—the white pines that occupy less than 30% of the total area. The problem is that these pines are now maturing where finding small owls high in the tops of them is becoming increasingly difficult. In another few years finding owls in these pines will be really really hard!

The evening was spent over on the nearby Hipsley Mill old fields that are favored haunts of the American Woodcock. We were not disappointed. With over a dozen birders we easily had six if not more displaying woodcock on a very pleasant evening in February.

In sum, the participants learned how to look for wintering owls. I was really impressed by the group. They were finding pellets and whitewash faster than I could get around to flag the spot! Excellent students! Now we can hope they will all find owls somewhere else!??

Below is a list of the birds I had for the day at the Annapolis Rock area pines:

Wild Turkey 1  
Black Vulture 1  
Turkey Vulture 2  
Barred Owl 2  
Northern Saw-whet Owl 1  
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 1  
American Crow 10  
Carolina Chickadee 5  
White-breasted Nuthatch 1  
Hermit Thrush 1

#### PARTICIPANTS:

Kathy Calvert, Keecha Chenjo, Mary Lou Clark, Cathy Czajkowski, Tom Eck, Mary Erickson, Ann & Paul Finneran, David Fleischmann, Brad Hamilton, Peter Hanan, Brad Hendricks, Mark Hendricks, Susan Imbach, Randy Kimmett, Brent Kruse, Allen Lewis, Wen Lin & Jya Mei Lu, Mary Maxey, Tom McKelvey, Sophie Oriani, Heidi & Howard Osterman, Pat Pitts, Sarah Romero, Ron Salsman, David Sandler, Karen Sandler, Gene Scarpula, Allen & Melody Schaeffer, Anna Schrad, Bryan Sirotkin, Debbie Swing, Lisa Troutman, Marcia Watson, Maureen Williams, Anne Wilson, and Scott & Alice Young,. My field assistants were Marcy Stutzman and Anthony VanSchoor.



Left: Northern Saw-whet Owl in pines at Annapolis Rock Road, Patuxent River State Park, Howard Co., Maryland. 18 February 2017.

Below: Long-eared Owl, same area, 19 January 2017. All photos by Anthony VanSchoor.



American Woodcock calling from ground. Hipsley Mill Road, Patuxent River State Park, Howard Co., Maryland. 17 February 2017.

All photos by Anthony VanSchoor.