FOR THE BIRDS

by John Trott, Contributing Columnist

The Saw-Whet Owl Is a Sight to See

A number of years ago, as light was fading at the end of a winter day, a noisy flock of chickadees and titmice alerted me to the presence of a little owl with golden eyes. At the time, I was living in a log house in the woods near McLean. The fragment of a back yard was enclosed by a dense, shrubby growth of

hemlocks. I heard the agitated chickadees and titmice and went out to investigate. The little birds were circling one of the evergreens and making angry scolding sounds.

When I appeared, the birds scattered to tall trees, still voicing their concern. To them I was just another — much larger — predator.

Perched motionless in a hemlock was a diminutive owl no more than seven inches long from the top of its head down to its short, stubby tail. The little brownish owl's eyes glowed with a fierce golden light that told me it was not to be dislodged from the hemlock by either the scolding birds or me. I moved closer until I could easily see the conspicuous white "V" that ran up from the bill and over its eyes.

It was a saw-whet owl, the smallest of that nocturnal group of birds in the eastern United States. I went back inside for my camera and returned to take photo after photo from no more than a few feet away.

What is it about owls that intrigues us so? Traditionally they have been associated with both wisdom and evil: contradictory concepts. Wisdom is questionable. In my reading about owls in general and saw-whet owls in particular, I learned that the tiny owl in the hemlock is so tame I could have plucked it from its perch. Does that level of tameness equal wisdom?

For centuries owls were associated with witches and the dark forces of Satan. Hearing a screech owl at night was an evil omen during my growing-up years in rural North Carolina.

The fixed, fierce gaze of an owl *does* suggest some great secret — unknown and unknowable. The fact that they are creatures of the night — nocturnal — adds to the illusion.

Most owls are more correctly termed *crepuscular*: active at twilight when distinct shapes are fading from the woods. Then they sail out on wings made silent by a peculiar feather structure that enables them to surprise their prey. Owl feathers are long and soft and offer no resistance to the wind flowing through them. Legs and even toes of owls are covered with feathers that also contribute to noiseless flight.

The unusually large eyes of owls are fixed in the front of the head like that of humans.

JOHN TROTT PHOTO

The saw-whet owl, measuring around seven inches from the top of its head to its short, stubby tail, is the smallest of its kind in the eastern United States.

We, after all, are also predators who do not concern ourselves with what is after us. Like owls, our concentration is on what is before us.

Owls have an opaque nictitating membrane, a third eyelid, that moves from inside out to protect the eyes during flight. With eyes fixed in their sockets, owls must turn their heads in order to look from right to left. Fourteen neck vertebrae (humans have seven) allow an owl to turn its head a full three-quarters of the way around, 270 degrees. When looking left and then abruptly right, it appears an owl has turned its head *all* the way around! As a child, I was told that if I walked around an owl several times, it would screw its head off!

An owl's keen sense of hearing is one of the most unusual and intriguing aspects of these creatures of the night. Ears are large openings on the sides of the head covered by soft feathers. It is these ears that enable an owl to detect its prey — a mouse, for instance — softly scrabbling through the dry leaves on the forest floor. Not only can an owl hear what would be silence to us, it can fix on the exact location of the mouse and swoop down to snatch it up

with its talons. Awareness of these talons, curved and cruelly sharp, prevented me from attempting to capture the saw-whet in the hemlock, tame though I learned it to be.

An owl's flat facial disc is composed of a short, sharp and hooked bill perfect for tearing. The large eyes in this disc, combined with the bill and acute hearing, enable an owl to be a

fierce and effective hunter.

The call of the saw-whet owl supposedly resembles the filing, or sharpening (whetting) of a large mill saw. The owl in the hemlock remained for a week or more, but I never heard its call.

Like hummingbirds and hawks, the female owl is larger than the male. Small size, in owls at least, equals productive hunting. An extended study in Texas revealed that a female screech owl will select the smallest of the males available to her for a mate. For her, small size indicates a fiercely efficient mate in capturing food for their young. These young hatch in a cavity — usually an old woodpecker nesting site — from almost perfectly round, chalky-white eggs.

The saw-whet owl often nests in an abandoned cavity of a Flicker. Incuba-

tion by the female commences with the first egg laid, so that the five to six eggs hatch at odd and extended intervals. The first egg laid hatches first and this first-hatched may be a week or so older than the last young to emerge from its egg. In cases where adults are not providing enough food, the older fledgling will often kill and feast on his younger brother or sister.

After a swift and silent kill, an owl will swallow prey whole when possible. Nutritious elements are digested and bones, fur, feathers and mammalian teeth are coughed up in dry, oval pellets that accumulate under a perch or nest. A close study and dissection of a pellet by a person knowledgeable about anatomy can determine the owl's food preferences.

The saw-whet owl stayed in the back yard for a week or so. Each day a band of birds gathered to noisily protest its presence. During this mobbing, the little owl seemed unconcerned. Yet, one afternoon, I became convinced that the yellow eyes fixed themselves on one plump chickadee. Was the owl selecting its next meal? ■