



Ontario Owl Survey Newsletter June 2021



2021 Marks our 27th Ontario Owl Survey Season! – *COVID-19 Second Edition*

All the staff of Birds Canada want to extend our heartfelt “thank you”! We thank you for continuing to bird at home, reporting your backyard birds and for having taken appropriate actions to protect yourself, your family and your community from COVID-19. Please take comfort in the fact that the 25-year owl dataset is robust, and that two years of limited data collection will not affect future analyses.

The 2020 Survey Summary

The 2020 survey season lasted only 1 week before it was cancelled due to COVID-19. Yet in this short time frame we still received eight completed northern Ontario surveys and twenty-two completed central Ontario surveys (Figure 1). The 2021 data is still arriving and, at this time, we have approximately 100 data sets. We hope to provide an up to date summary of the 2021 data, and possibly, an analysis as part of next year’s report.

A big “**thank you**” to the dedicated Owl Survey Participants who have stuck with us during 2020 and 2021. Thanks also to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry for its continued support.

Kathy Jones, Volunteer Manager, Ontario Program

Inside...	
2020 Survey Summary	1
The Science Report	3
The Cross Canada Round-up	4
Owl Observation Tips	4
The People Report	7
Feedback Survey Results	7
Gardening for Birds	10
The Atlas Owls	10
Contact Info	11

Check out the Refreshed Owl Survey Protocols at [birdscanada.org/on owls](https://birdscanada.org/on_owls)

The 2021 editions of the Owl Survey Protocols are refreshed to include modern technologies as well as NatureCounts and data entry tips.

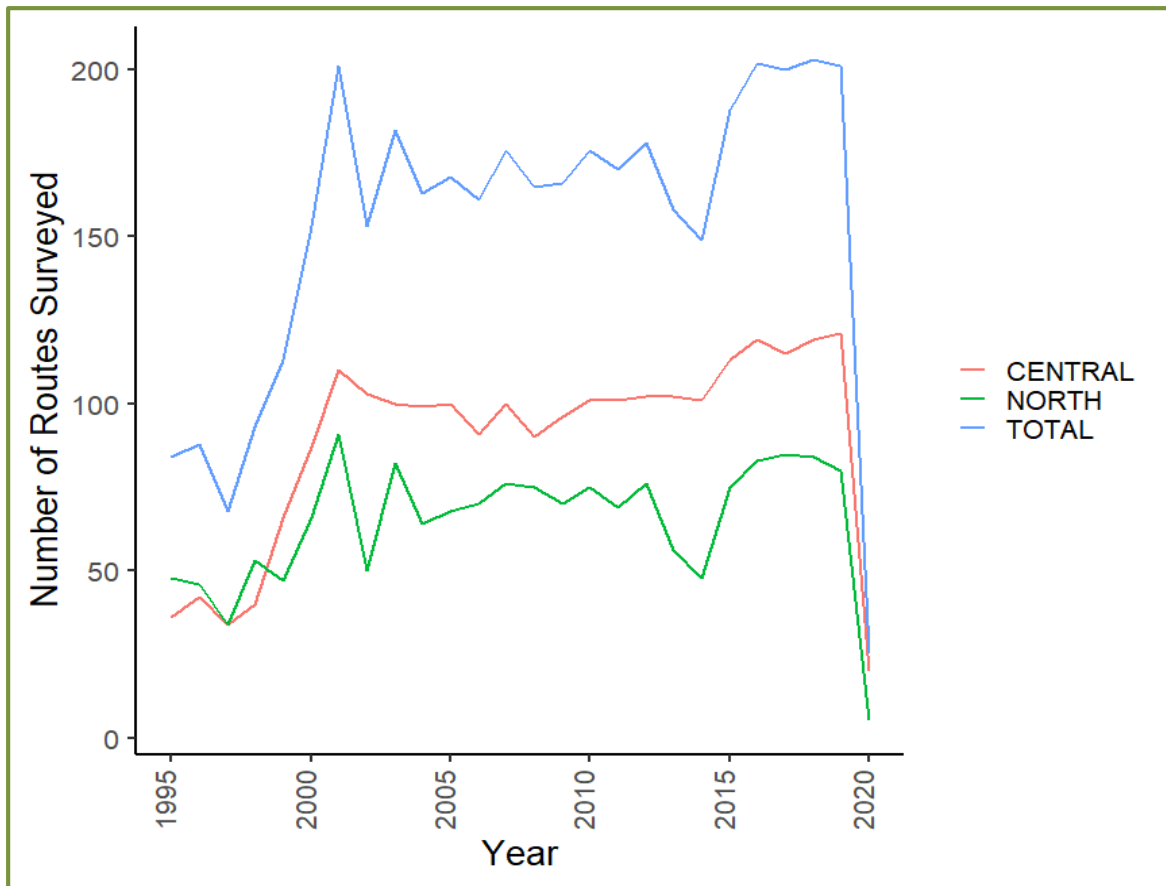
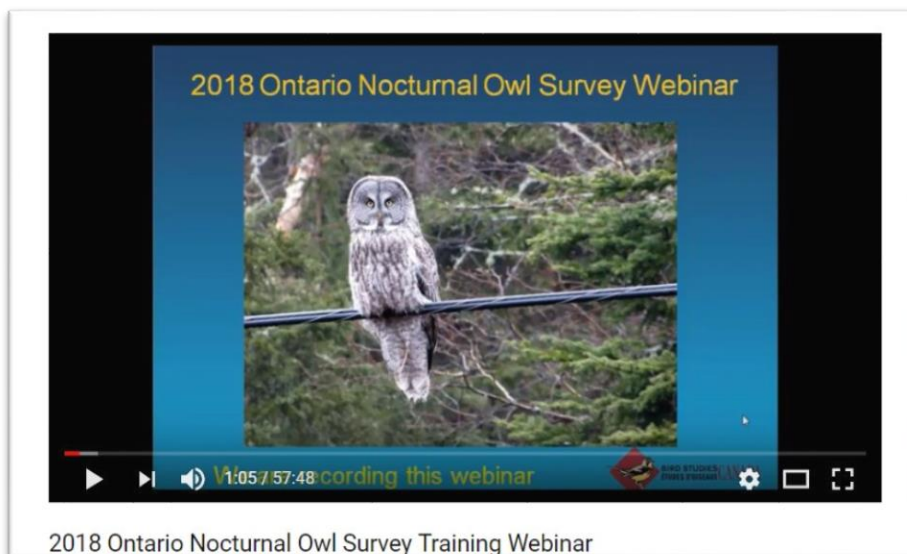


Figure 1: The number of Ontario Owl Survey Routes, 1995-2020.

Want to learn more about surveying?

Listen to the 2018 Owl Survey Webinar on the Birds Canada YouTube page
<https://t.co/utVWY29WsB>



The Science Report:

Research Update

In the 2020 newsletter we introduced Janet Greenhorn's collaborative research on correlations between Fisher harvest-age ratios and abundance of Northern Saw-whet Owls, using the Ontario Owl Survey dataset. Results suggest that mountain ash berry crop production can lead to abundant red-backed voles the following year and consequently increased Northern Saw-whet Owl abundance. In turn, the next year may see a larger proportion of juvenile fishers in the harvest. Dr. Danielle Ethier reports that the manuscript is moving forward and will be published in *Wildlife Biology*. In addition, Dr. Ethier will be submitting a manuscript on the Atlantic Owl Survey (see Cross-Canada roundup below) – this manuscript forms the analytical basis for the forthcoming national status assessment of owls.

Research Sampling: For your interest here is a selection of informative owl research papers that were published in the last year.

Wood, Connor M. et al. "Illuminating the Nocturnal Habits of Owls with Emerging Tagging Technologies." *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 45 (2021): 138-143.

<https://wildlife.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/wsb.1156>

Peňazziová, K.; Korytár, L.; Pastorek, P.; Pistl, J.; Rusňáková, D.; Szemes, T.; Čabanová, V.; Ličková, M.; Boršová, K.; Klempa, B.; Csank, T. Genetic Characterization of a Neurovirulent West Nile Virus Variant Associated with a Fatal Great Grey Owl Infection. *Viruses* 2021, 13, 699.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/v13040699>

Reynolds, Madison, John Shook, Greg Breed and Knut Kielland. Detection and Density of the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) in Arctic Alaska. *J. Raptor Res.* 2021. 55(1):56–64

<https://doi.org/10.3356/0892-1016-55.1.56>

Lima, Kyle, Thomas Hodgman, David Potter, Susan Gallo, Erik Blomberg. Environmental conditions and call-broadcast influence detection of eastern forest owls during standardized surveys *The Condor*. 2020. 122:1-20 <https://doi.org/10.1093/condor/duaa016>

Brenner, Stephen J. and Joel G. Jorgenson. Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) banding in eastern Nebraska during fall 2020 — a major flight year. Nongame Bird Program of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA

<https://birds.outdoornebraska.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Northern-Saw-whet-Owl-banding-in-eastern-Nebraska-2020.pdf>

Gutiérrez, R.J. Invited commentary: When a conservation conflict comes full circle-The Spotted Owl conflict is a wicked problem. *J. Raptor Res.* 2020, 54, 337–348. <https://doi.org/10.3356/0892-1016-54.4.337>

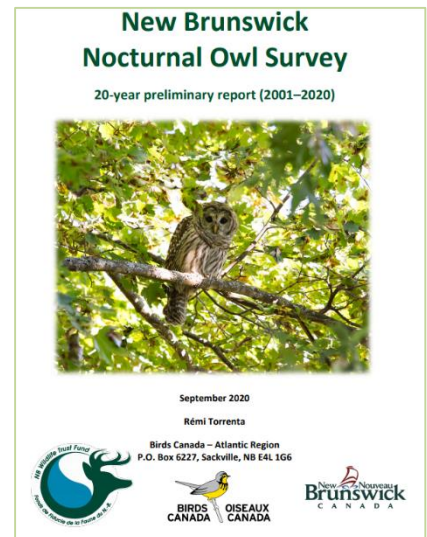
Wiens, J.D., Dugger, K.M., Lesmeister, D.B., Dilione, K.E., and Simon, D.C., 2020, Effects of barred owl (*Strix varia*) removal on population demography of northern spotted owls (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) in Washington and Oregon—2019 annual report: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2020–1089, 19 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20201089>.

Jessie F Salter, Carl H Oliveros, Peter A Hosner, Joseph D Manthey, Mark B Robbins, Robert G Moyle, Robb T Brumfield, Brant C Faircloth, Extensive paraphyly in the typical owl family (Strigidae), *The Auk*, Volume 137, Issue 1, 2 January 2020, ukz070, <https://doi.org/10.1093/auk/ukz070>

Cross-Canada Round Up: Owl-ly bits and other learnings from Birds Canada programs.

Sign up at www.birdscanada.org to receive Birds Canada monthly news.

Nocturnal Owl Survey In The Atlantic Region: Already 20 Years Of Data! By Dr. Rémi Torrenta, Bird Projects Biologist. Read the full [report](#) as it provides a 20-year trend analysis for Barred, Great Horned and Northern Saw-whet Owls **on both public and private lands, and compares trends and forest habitat between public and private lands**. It also provides a brief insight about owl habitat associations in NB.



Old Growth Logging In British Columbia By Yousif Attia and James Casey

Volunteering To Clarify Foggy Owl Trends In Newfoundland by Dr. Catherine Dale, Newfoundland Breeding Bird Atlas Coordinator.

Check out “The Warblers” podcast – it will inform, entertain, inspire!



OWL OBSERVATION TIPS FOR BIRDERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS

Feb 23, 2021 | BIRDS CANADA **FEATURED NEWS** (REPRINTED) *This article was co-written by a team of Birds Canada staff: Ellen Jakubowski, Jody Allair, Kathy Jones, Ruth Friendship-Keller, and Yousif Attia.*

For many bird lovers in Canada, seeing our first Snowy Owl or Northern Saw-whet Owl is a cherished memory. These powerful chance encounters can even spark an interest in birds and nature that lasts a lifetime! We benefit from these experiences, but, if we're not mindful, the impact on the owls can be negative one.

In Canada, the late fall and winter seasons are prime time to see many owl species that move south from northern forests and the Arctic, as part of an annual migration or because of a lack of food in their traditional summering range. Locations such as coastal green spaces in cities like Vancouver



or forested areas on the edges of the Great Lakes can attract congregations of several species depending on food availability and other factors.

It is during these times that several owl species are sometimes subjected to harmful or even deadly disturbance by people who come to add to their bird list, take photos, or simply have a look at the owl. Constant disturbance uses up valuable energy during the cold winter months and may prevent birds from hunting properly, both of which can be lethal. And some species that roost communally, like the Long-eared Owl, are very sensitive to any disturbances during the winter months. When the presence of people drives them from their roost, these surprisingly dainty owls are made more vulnerable to predators than they would be otherwise, and they suffer the fatal consequences.



So how can we still appreciate these amazing birds without causing harm? Here are some guidelines for observing and photographing owls:

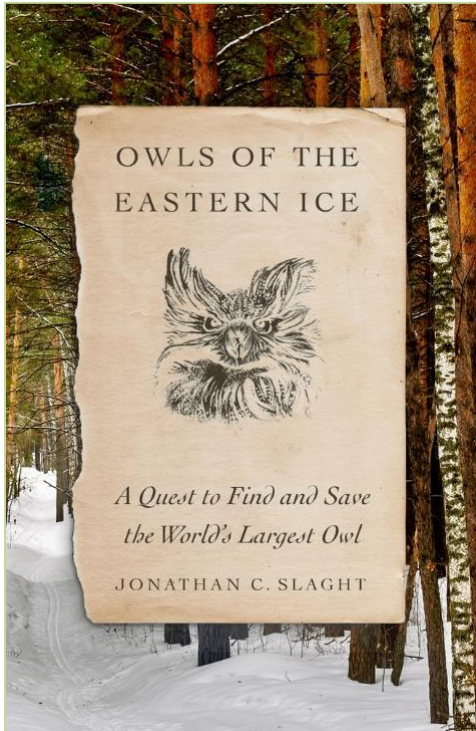
- Watch or photograph quietly and from a distance.
- Do not disturb roosting owls.
- Move on after a few minutes. If the bird looks towards you, or its behaviour otherwise seems to change in response to your presence, then you should move farther away.
- Do not bait owls. The owls can become habituated to being fed by people. This disrupts their natural hunting behaviours and draws them to the roadside, which can lead to collisions with vehicles.
- Audio playback should not be used to attract owls (outside of standardized owl surveys, KJ)
- Don't use spotlights or flash photography, and do not trim foliage or cut down trees to get a better view of the bird.
- If the owl flies away, do not follow it and do not go off trail to pursue it.
- To avoid drawing a crowd, use discretion when it comes to sharing information about your observation. If you submit it to eBird, review the guidelines for sensitive species. We recommend that you do not mention the specific location of the owl when telling your story.

We thank all of you who show your appreciation for these beautiful and sensitive birds by giving them space when you encounter them. Preventing disturbance to owls is an important way to help their populations survive and thrive in the wild.

Please [donate](#) and help Birds Canada support critical efforts to keep our common birds common while taking direct action to conserve at-risk species.

GIVE

Good Reads:



OWLS OF THE EASTERN ICE

A Quest to Find and Save the World's Largest Owl

By Jonathan C. Slaughter

Reprinted from

<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374228484>

"I saw my first Blakiston's fish owl in the Russian province of Primorye, a coastal talon of land hooking south into the belly of Northeast Asia . . . No scientist had seen a Blakiston's fish owl so far south in a hundred years "

When he was just a fledgling birdwatcher, Jonathan C. Slaughter had a chance encounter with one of the most mysterious birds on Earth. Bigger than any owl he knew, it looked like a small bear with decorative feathers. He snapped a quick photo and shared it with experts. Soon he was on a five-year journey, searching for this enormous, enigmatic creature in the lush, remote forests of eastern Russia. That first sighting set his calling as a scientist.

Try the newly refreshed Website portal!

Visit www.birdscanada.org/on_owls for all your owling needs.

If you are interested in participating: review the map, the volunteer position description and then complete the "Request a Survey Route" form.

If you are a current volunteer: use birdscanada.org/on_owl as your "one stop shop" that gives you access to the:

- | | | |
|--------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| ✓ Newsletter | ✓ Survey Availability Map | ✓ Data forms |
| ✓ Protocols | ✓ Request a Route form | ✓ Volunteer Portal |

Use the "Volunteer Portal", to **sign up/sign in** to the secure NatureCounts website for:

- | | | |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| ✓ Past Newsletters | ✓ Data submission | ✓ Training CD MP3 files |
| ✓ Stop coordinates | ✓ MP3 broadcast files | ✓ Owl survey vehicle sign |
| ✓ Owl surveyor in action cards (to hand out to concerned citizens) | | |

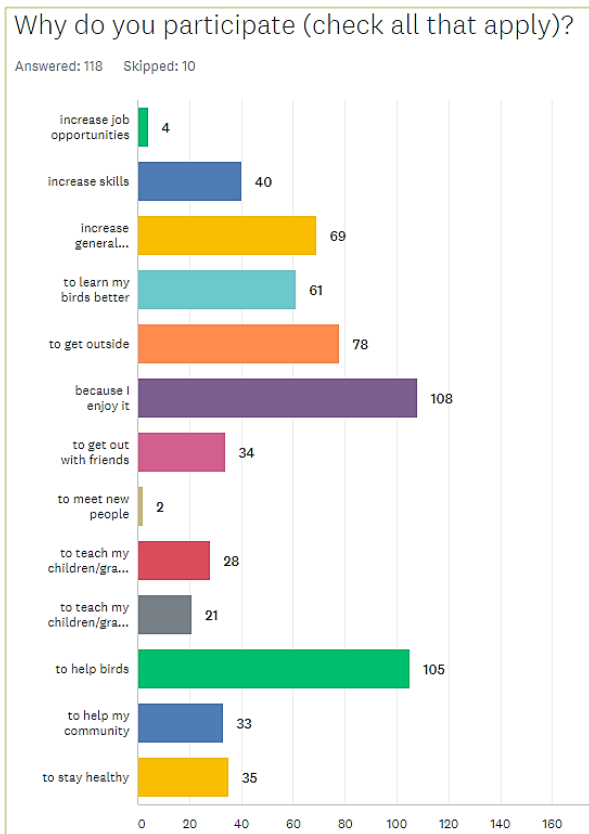
Eleven owls last night!!!!!!! Ten Barred and one Great Horned. A good night - my first one. Saw several of them too and many called in the first block before even playing the barred call.

Cheers, Martin

• #OWLSURVEY #FIELDNOTE •
WWW.BIRDSCANADA.ORG/ON_OWLS

The People Report: The 2020 Ontario Owl Survey Volunteer Feedback Summary.

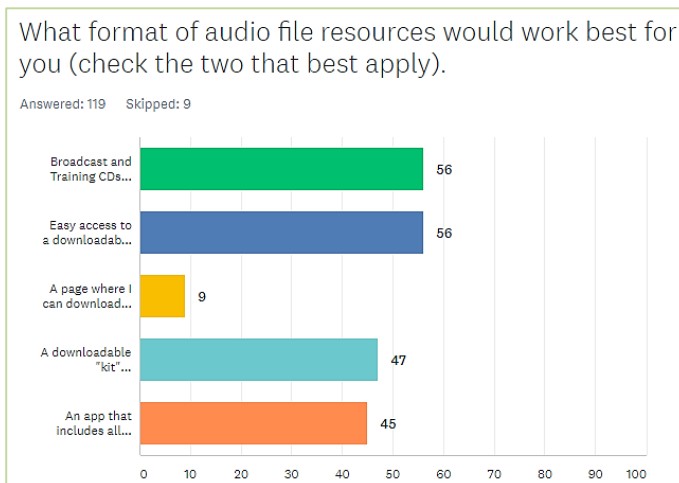
With the cancellation of the 2020 Owl Survey field season, Birds Canada staff felt it was important to reach out to volunteers regarding the cancellation and to take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about the program's volunteers. Kathy Jones, with support from various Birds Canada staff, created and distributed a [volunteer feedback survey](#) during the early fall of 2020. The following is reprinted directly from the Ontario Nocturnal Owl 2020 Field Season Final Report Produced for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (February 2021).



In total, 129 of the 239 registered Owl Survey participants submitted responses providing a 6% margin of error and a 98% confidence limit (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-K9FCZBDK9/>). The majority of volunteers surveyed have been with the program for at least 3 years with similar proportions responding from Central and Northern Ontario. Close to half of participants are, or have, worked in the environmental/resources industry with the most common employer being the provincial government especially in northern Ontario. Only 1 person under 30 responded to the survey. Over 90% of participants survey with family or close friends some or all the time and only a quarter assisted on a survey route before being assigned their own route. A slightly greater proportion are male and almost all are Caucasian with over 70% living in households with two or fewer people.

Volunteer survey feedback data showed that while only 60% of participants agreed with the COVID-19 shutdown, 100%, understood and accepted the decision. Participants were concerned regarding the loss of data as well as the loss of future survey years. If the Owl Survey were to be cancelled in 2021? the majority would accept and continue with the program in the future, but there is a risk of a $\geq 30\%$ loss of volunteers. In comments, more than 30 volunteers expressed their belief that they would not be in danger of COVID-19 during the execution of the owl survey, or had a low encounter risk. Only 7 respondents acknowledged travel risk and 8 acknowledged regional differences in COVID restrictions. Several volunteers expressed that they would complete survey despite covid restrictions and would either (1) not return data for Birds Canada or (2) return data to other programs instead (Atlas, eBird).

Regarding volunteer management and resources, the survey suggests that participants were very happy with the materials and communications they received and data clearly shows that additional materials were not required. The only commonly requested addition was species in focus/life history items. Less than half of participants feel webinars were needed but the most common webinar types requested, in order of response, were: (1) annual and long term results, (2) focus species/biology and (3) real-time survey videos. Results suggest there was a disconnect from Owl volunteers with other Birds Canada programming as there was a tendency to request non-owl resources and actions that Birds Canada provides through other programs. This is explained to a certain extent by the fact that half of owl survey volunteers do not participate in other Birds Canada programs.



Volunteers preferred to receive printed data forms, however the majority preferred to submit their data online. The survey showed a continued need to provide paper resources and CDs, but also demonstrated a need to work on technology improvements such as better interactive and/or printable maps, improved access to digital files and an improved data entry interface. It was clear that the majority of volunteers did not want to fuss with an app in the field, but that 30% would still prefer an app for data entry. *Birds Canada acknowledges that these preferences are specific to existing volunteers and that modern technologies may improve the diversity of participants.*

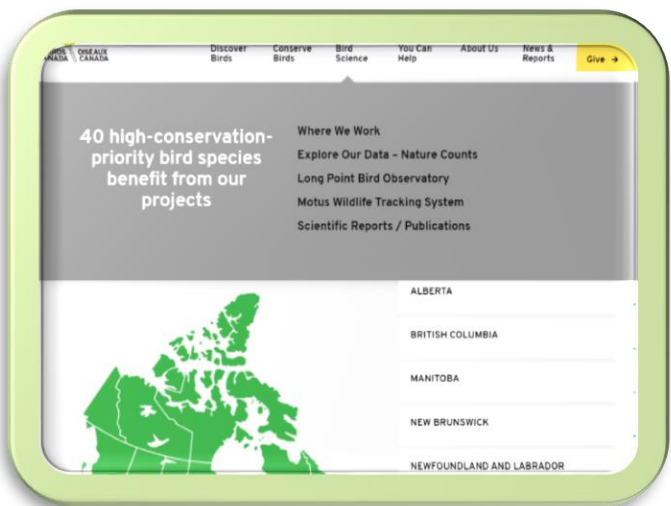
A big "thank you" to all owl survey participants who took the time to complete the volunteer feedback survey. If interested in addition survey results please contact Kathy Jones, volunteer@birdscanada.

The last question of the feedback survey was ***"Finally, is there anything else you would like to share?"*** Below is a sample of the answers provided. Thank you to the Birds Canada team for their hard work in ensuring this research is able to continue!

- I love doing the survey!
- Look forward to getting back out there, whether it is this year or next!!
- My area is very north with no cell phone service available to me. The stops are along a highway used by logging trucks and if there is no pull off available it is unsafe to stop for listening. Some years the snow pack is very high. *Editor's note: before you survey please take the time to read the safety tips provided with your participant materials – do not survey if you are uncertain of your safety.*
- Thank you for the privilege of being part of your Owl Survey Volunteer Team.
- I really enjoy this program and love to tell people of the owls we encounter every year!
- I eBird everything in the field, and I would be comfortable ebirding while owling, except if I'm switching from looking at a bright screen, then trying to look into the trees towards an owl call, I have to wait for my eyes to readjust. It is good to have all of the options (paper and phone app) for people to create the optimum survey experience for them and their team. I fully support encouraging people to do as much data entry themselves online or in the app.

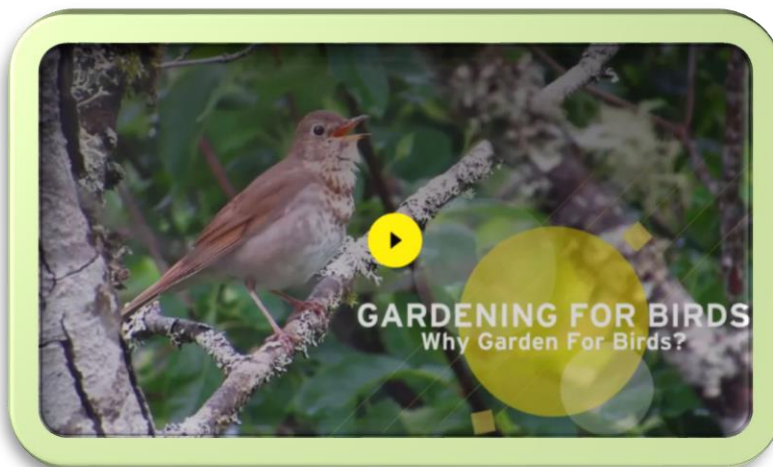
- April almost seems a little late to be surveying for Owls around here. We see and hear them frequently in March. *Editor's note: February to May surveys were evaluated during the pilot years of the survey. After, the Owl Survey committee decided April provided the most effective timing for breeding owls and appropriate survey conditions across Central and Northern Ontario.*
- Thanks for engaging volunteers for feedback.
- I like your program and wish I could participate more often but routes are always taken!
- Some routes have many owls while others have few or none. A long term participant that never experiences owls may not see the point of continuing as it has been shown that owls are not using the area.
- Very thankful there are people like you and organizations like the one you work for and we are members of. Someone has to care about our wildlife and their habitat.
- My area seems to be becoming less owly than a few years ago.
- My hands tend to get fairly cold when doing the owl survey, which is why I prefer hard copy forms (its easier to use a pen with gloves on than it is to use my phone).
- The nocturnal owl survey is really the highlight of my year.
- I like the direction of an app being used for data collection, however, I don't have cell service on my route (northern Ontario) and so I would hope the app would be usable in offline or airplane mode. If not, I am happy to continue to do it on paper and then input data later.
- Bird Studies Canada needs to support the Federal Liberal Government in the goal of protecting 30% of land and water by 2030 and urge all provincial governments to move towards that goal. We also need to support the creation of Indigenous Protected Areas through conservation. *Editor's note: Birds Canada is very supportive of Canada's efforts to significantly increase its network of protected areas, and supportive also of Indigenous communities' work to establish Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas. We are working with diverse partners and governments to advance these goals across the country, including promoting increased financial support for these efforts.*

To learn more about Birds Canada's conservation and educational programs please review our [Annual Report](#), as well as "[the Roost](#)" and "[Where We Work](#)" sections of the webpages.



A New – Old Way to help Boreal Birds – by gardening: [Start Gardening For Birds Today!](#) By Natasha Barlow, Gardening for Birds Project Lead

We all know that nature is under threat. Habitat loss and degradation is still one of the main drivers of bird population declines globally. Birds need your help, and you can be part of the solution. Transform your garden or yard into a beautiful outdoor space that you can enjoy, while also re-creating habitat for birds. We are excited to launch our Gardening for Birds website, video series, and resources that will help you help birds by making it easy for you to design and plant a garden that is great for birds. Whether you have an existing garden that could use a few tweaks or an expansive lawn that you're hoping to transform for the benefit of nature, the website, videos, and associated resources will give you a head start on welcoming more birds to your place!

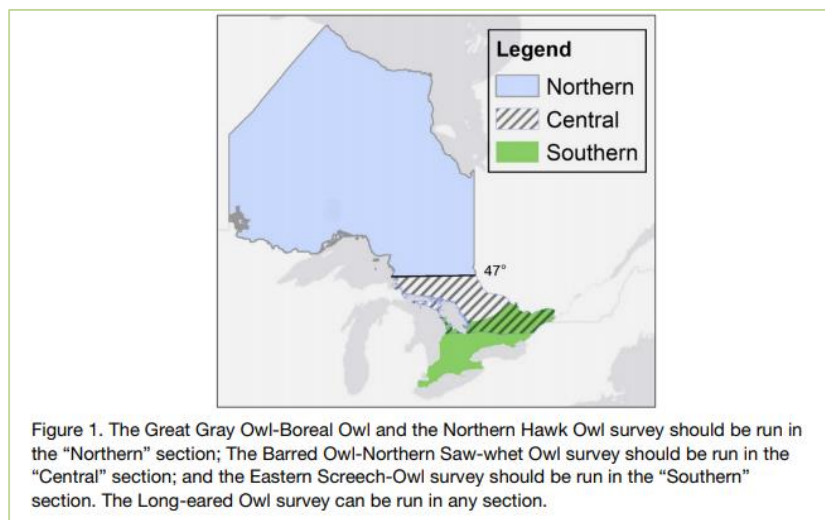


The Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas – 3: the owl surveys.

Starting in the summer of 2020 a group of dedicated owl scientists worked together to create a series of specialty surveys for the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas – 3. Data from these specialized owl surveys in combination with regular Atlas Point Count data, Atlas checklist data and Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey data will be used to evaluate the distribution and relative abundance of Ontario's nocturnal species. Please note that if you survey for the Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey, you do not have to conduct a special owl protocol at the same locations – **your data will be shared with the Atlas.**

The special survey protocols are:

- Eastern Screech-Owl
- Northern Hawk Owl
- Barred and Northern Saw-whet Owl
- Great Gray and Boreal Owl
- Long-eared Owl (summer)
- Nightjar Survey Protocol (summer)



To learn more about these protocols visit birdsontario.org/owl-nightjar-surveys/, to participate please contact the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Regional Coordinator for your area (birdsontario.org/regional-coordinators/).

Birds Canada is on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and I (Kathy Jones) am on Facebook and Twitter. **For 2021, we would LOVE to hear and see photos about your #fieldsurveys and #naturemoments.** Tag us or use the hashtag: #owlsurvey so we can find and share your story or just email it directly to volunteer@birdscanada.org.



Thanks to our volunteers and sponsors!

We heartily thank the volunteers, who have become far too numerous to mention by name, for their participation in the 1995-2020 surveys. These people generously donated their valuable time and equipment to venture forth on cold, dark nights to survey owls. They are making essential contributions to owl conservation across Ontario. We would also like to thank the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry – Provincial Wildlife Monitoring Program for their support of this program, and our local [Wiggan's W.F. Clover Farm](#) in Port Rowan who supplied our volunteers with much appreciated hot chocolate.

Kathy Jones, volunteer@birdscanada.org; twitter: @Volunteer4Birds;

facebook.com/Volunteer4Birds; instagram.com/volunteer4birds

Ontario Owl Survey, Bird Studies Canada, P.O. Box 160, Port Rowan, ON N0E 1M0, 519-586-3531 ext. 124, Toll-free 1-888-448-2473, birdscanada.org/on_owls



Birds Canada fully endorses The American Birding Association's Code of Birding Ethics and encourages our supporters to abide by this code.

[CODE OF BIRDING ETHICS V.2.1, NOV. 2019](#)

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[Guidelines for Reporting Sensitive Species to eBird](#)

[The Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Code of Ethics](#)