

# Northern saw-whet owl winter roosting research update

K. Stone

01/20/11



We attached radio transmitters to four northern saw-whet owls to look at winter roosting behavior. Two owls were captured on the northern floodplain, and two were captured in the Sheep Camp drainage. One owl at each location had been previously captured and banded by the owl crew in the fall. The other two owls were unbanded.

All four owls managed to pull off their transmitters within a few days of attachment. Despite this difficulty, we documented some unusual roosting sites. We were surprised at the use of ponderosa pine by three of the four owls, and at how difficult it was to locate the owls high in the pines, even when we knew one was present.

The owl crew also located several northern saw-whet owl roosts through passive searching.







This ponderosa pine in Sheep Camp is a popular roost site for one saw-whet owl. We detected it at the end of two different branches, both about 30 feet high. We would have had a hard time locating either of these roosts without the help of the radio signal. Though this owl no longer has a transmitter on, we have detected it in this tree consistently for more than a week. This tree is one of the largest pines in the Sheep Camp drainage.



Sheep Camp ponderosa pine roost sites







One of the owls in Sheep Camp used this small Douglas-fir as a roost site. The roost was on one of the lowest branches of the tree.



Matt found plenty of whitewash under the roost, twelve pellets, and a headless mouse. We collected the pellets to examine what the owls are eating.



Like many of the owls that we radio-tracked in the fall, the two owls captured on the northern floodplain flew west after release and roosted on the other side of the Bitterroot River. We are wondering if our audio lure is pulling them over from more suitable habitat. The floodplain forest on the west side of the river has a much more well-developed understory than that of the MPG Ranch.



Both owls roosted in large ponderosa pines prior to pulling off their transmitters. Photo ER.





Finding a transmitter once it has been pulled off is difficult. If the transmitter is on the ground and/or in dense vegetation, its signal may be weak or confusing. Eric Rasmussen and I did several circles in this area prior to zeroing in on a clump of live and dead branches at the base of a cottonwood. We were able to pick up a signal with just the receiver and no antenna, suggesting that we were within feet of the transmitter. Despite pulling much of the debris out of this clump, we were unable to locate this transmitter. We were able to recover the other three transmitters.





Matt and William found this northern saw-whet owl while doing passive roost searches in Sheep Camp. It was unbanded. They were able to capture it, band it, and examine its roost in a small juniper. They found several pellets at the roost site and lots of telltale whitewash. I checked this roost site two days later and did not find the owl. Some owls show high fidelity to a particular roost site, and some move between several roost sites.

