

Rare bird 'hit-and-run' victim

By Harold B. Wales
Times Nature Writer

An important discovery in Louisiana ornithology was made Feb. 15 by Paul Yakupzak of Natchitoches because he took the trouble to investigate the victim of a "hit-and-run" accident.

Driving along State Road 493 about a quarter of a mile from the east entrance of Kisatchie Forest, he saw a dead bird in the road. It looked too big for a quail, and too small for a hawk, Paul said, so he stopped to see what kind of a bird it was. To his surprise, it was a small owl—a species he had never seen before.

It was so tiny that he first thought it was a screech owl, but it lacked ear tufts, so he ruled out that possibility. Upper parts were cinnamon brown, with the head finely streaked, and the back spotted with white. The underparts were white, streaked with bold rufous stripes. The eyes were yellow, and the legs and feet were feathered. The bird had evidently been killed by a car the night before, and cold weather had kept it from spoiling.

Paul works at the National Fish Hatchery in Natchitoches, and after work, he brought the bird to the aquarium where I work to see if I could identify it. Since, in my older days, I am not much of a "night owl", I know very little about owls. I, too, had never seen an owl like it.

We measured the bird, and it was eight and a half inches long; the wingspread was 17 inches. It seemed inconceivable that an owl so small could be a bird of prey, but the tiny feet had needle-sharp talons, and the small beak was equally sharp.

At first, because of its diminutive size, I thought it was an immature owl of some kind. Owls are generally very early nesters, sometimes in the South having young as early as January. This adaption is rather remarkable, for the birds gain a great advantage by bringing forth their young as close as possible to the annual peak of the small rodent population.

It so happened that I had Peterson's Field Guide and the



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Northern saw-whet owl

Golden Field Guide, North American Birds, in my car, and we studied the owl pictures and descriptions. Paul insisted that he thought the bird was a northern saw-whet owl (*Cryptoglaux acadia*), and I finally had to admit that he was right. We put the bird in the aquarium deep-freeze. A few days later, James Stewart of Shreveport, an authority on birds, visited the aquarium, and confirmed our identification. He said the saw-whet is nocturnal, and is very seldom seen in the daytime.

Paul sent the bird to the LSU Museum of Natural History in Baton Rouge, the skin will be preserved for posterity. It is the third northern saw-whet owl ever to be reported in Louisiana. A specimen was collected near Madisonville in the winter of 1889, and identified by Professor George E. Beyer. The second record is that of a bird found at Hackberry on Dec. 29, 1962 by Sidney A. Gauthreaux, Robert B. Moore and Gus Hannibal. Paul Yakupzak has the distinction of establishing the third record of this species in Louisiana.

The northern saw-whet owl is probably a more frequent winter visitor to Louisiana than the records would indicate, for it may simply escape detection because of its retiring habits in daytime, according to George H. Lowery Jr. in "Louisiana Birds." The bird gets its name from its call, a peculiar scraping or rasping sound which suggests the sound made by filing a large-toothed saw.

Food studies of 22 stomachs of the northern saw-whet owl showed 17 with mice, two empty, one with a sparrow and one with an insect. Of seven stomachs taken in the summer and autumn by another observer, six contained insects only, and one contained a mouse. So bird food may be taken only when mice and insects are not available.

The small, dainty feet and beak of the saw-whet makes him incapable of handling anything larger than a mouse or small bird, but the needle-sharp talons and beak are formidable equipment for handling the small prey on which it feeds.