



How to have a GR-EIGHT owling day (and night)

BY JEFF SMITH

The winter of 2011/2012 saw a record, major irruption of Snowy Owls into Illinois. Double-digit numbers were observed along Chicago's lake-front and well inland, even extending to the far reaches of southern Illinois. These owls garnered much attention from the media, birders, and anyone with a camera. Not to be overlooked though, were the good numbers of Northern Saw-whet Owls reported on some of the northern Illinois Christmas Bird Counts. Short-eared Owls were also plentiful in the larger grassland preserves. Of the winter visitors, only Long-eared Owls were difficult to find on a regular basis. However, when I located a Barn Owl in northern Illinois on its winter roost, I began to think of attempting an eight owl big day.

Eight owl species either breed or are mostly regular, winter residents within Illinois. The Illinois record for number of owl species found in a single day had been seven since 1994 when Alan Welby located that many in northern Illinois. This number was duplicated in central Illinois by Bob Chapel in 1995 and in southern Illinois by Dan Kassebaum in 2004. Barn Owl was missed in the central and northern regions, and Snowy Owl was missed in the southern region. I'm sure the thought of an eight owl

day has crossed the minds of others several times in the past. I first heard of the possibility of having an Eight Owl Big Day when a Burrowing Owl was found at Pyramid State Park during the winter of 2006/2007. This year was the first time I'd have a reasonable chance to successfully attempt to record eight owls in a single day. Considering the extensive experience that all of our team members have had in locating and calling in owls, as well as the unique experience of having many of the uncommon to rare owls present and waiting for us to find them this winter, I felt our chances were very good for locating all of the owls that we would be searching for.

After showing several others the Barn Owl and determining it was indeed spending the winter, I began planning the attempt with Steve Bailey and Pete Moxon. We had several likely locations for finding most of the owls but knew of only one good spot for finding a Long-eared Owl. We set out at 3 a.m. on 12 February 2012. Our first location was a spot Pete felt could hold a saw-whet. Although nobody had actually found a saw-whet owl at this location, the habitat looked right, and Pete had found one not too long before, a short distance down the road. We played the tape of the saw-whet's "yap" call and quite to our

surprise we almost instantly got the saw-whet's "cat-like scream" call in response! We repeated the process to be sure we heard what we all thought we had heard and sure enough, got the same response. The bird was in a tangle only about 30 feet away. We sure did not expect our first owl species of the evening to be a saw-whet! Satisfied with the calling bird though, we headed to our next stop. We pulled into the parking lot at Elsen's Hill Forest Preserve in DuPage County to play a tape for an Eastern Screech-Owl. After several minutes, and not having walked very far down the trail from our car, we got a response from a Great Horned Owl. Not what we were looking for but, another owl species ticked off our list. We walked farther into the preserve to try again. After a few minutes a small, dark shadow flew across the trail, and soon afterwards a rather faint "whinny" type call began from the screech-owl. It was 3:40 a.m. and we had three species of owl already located. Since we were way ahead of schedule we continued walking the trail all the way down to the river to try for Barred Owl. No tape was necessary here as both Steve and Pete are quite proficient at calling in Barred Owls. Well, at least when a Barred Owl is within hearing range. This was not one of those times.