

## Kiera's Time at Rocky Point Bird Observatory

One of the most popular species at the Sanctuary through the winter is the Northern Saw-whet Owl. It is always a delight to find them roosting along our trails. Over the years of working here I have enjoyed learning about and watching out for them. So, when the opportunity arose to see them up close I just had to say yes!

Rocky Point Bird Observatory (RPBO) is a non-profit society based in Victoria. They manage two bird banding stations on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, which is an important migratory route for Northern Saw-whet Owls. Every year from September 15<sup>th</sup> to October 31<sup>st</sup>, nocturnal owl banding is conducted each night. Northern Saw-whet Owl activity typically peaks during the first week of October when over 60 individuals may be banded on a single night. Between the two stations, over 1,000 of them may be banded during a busy year. Since the start of owl monitoring in 2002, over 16,000 individuals have been banded. The data gathered at the banding station is sent to the Canadian Wildlife Service and the Bird Banding Laboratory of the U.S. Geological Survey where it is used for research purposes.



*Northern Saw-whet Owl*  
*Photo: Rocky Point Bird Observatory*



*Northern Saw-whet Owl wrapped in cloth bag*  
*Photo: Rocky Point Bird Observatory*

If you wish to see the banders at work, you can register as a visitor on their website through [rpbo.org](http://rpbo.org). Only the Pedder Bay banding station is open to the public and visitor slots are only available on certain nights which fill up quickly. To “whet” your appetite for this incredible educational opportunity, let me walk you through a night at the owl banding station.

As you approach the banding site, you can hear the “toot toot toot” territorial call of a male Northern Saw-whet Owl. The call comes from a speaker to entice nearby owls to investigate. The speaker is surrounded by several nets which catch the owls as they fly in to investigate the call. Volunteers check these nets for Northern Saw-whet Owls every twenty minutes, however, other species of owls around the banding stations occasionally get caught in these nets as well. When Barred Owls are caught, they are banded and released at the edge of the property at the end of the banding session. This is to prevent the larger owls, like barred owls, from making a meal out of the smaller Northern Saw-whet Owls while they are in the nets. So as an extra precaution, when predators are seen in the area, volunteers sit beside the nets to promptly extract the little owls as they are caught.

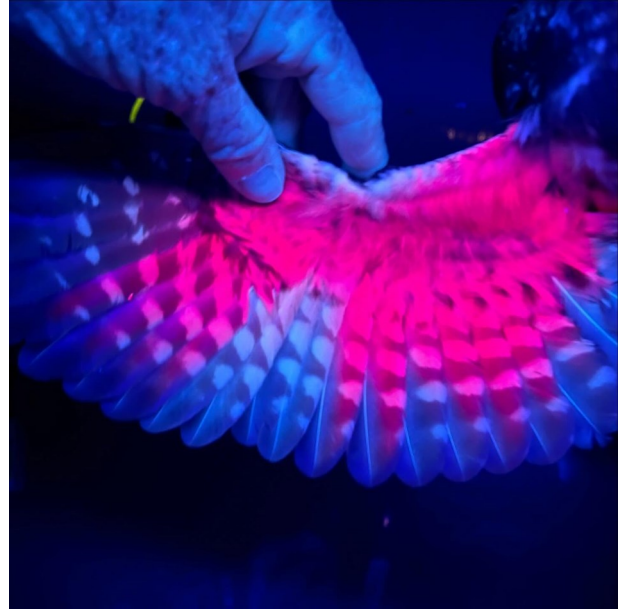
When a Northern Saw-whet Owl is in the net, it is carefully extracted by the feet first. It is then put in a dark cloth bag for transport back to the station where it will be processed by banders. Once banders are ready, they weigh the owl, place a number band on it, and take some measurements. Each owl has physically



*Northern Saw-whet Owl next to a eye colour chart  
Photo: Rocky Point Bird Observatory*

unique characteristics, so banders take note of their eye colour, foot colour, bill tip colour, as well as the wing and tail length and muscle condition.

Each bird is then aged based on the feather quality. For this, banders examine the owl's wing under a special black light. Freshly replaced feathers will appear bright pink which contrast strongly with any older, paler, feathers. The owl is then placed in a special "owl hotel" for release, and is free to fly away once its eyes adjust to the dark. The whole process only takes a few minutes.



*Northern Saw-whet Owl wing under UV light  
Photo: Rocky Point Bird Observatory*

Seeing Northern Saw-whet Owls up close and being involved in the research of them has given me a new appreciation for these creatures. Now, when I find one along our trails, I will be reminded of just how small they look in someone's hand, how subtly different each owl is, and how lucky we are to have them stay with us throughout the winter.

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