The Northern saw-whet owl is our smallest owl in the eastern US. Saw-whets tip the scales around only 3 ounces (ranging from 2.3-5.3 ounces), and typically reach about 8 inches in length. They are mottled brown and have a white breast with cinnamon and reddish brown streaks. Their striking yellow eyes peer out from a whitish facial disk, and dainty white streaks radiate around the face. Unlike Eastern Screech Owls, saw-whets have big rounded heads with no ear tufts. Their faces have a cat-like quality, and the V-shaped white patch above the eyes gives them a glowering look. Juveniles are dark brown with a creamy, yellowish breast and belly. Males and females have similar plumages, but females are about 25% larger than males.

Despite being one of the most common owls of northern US forests, the Northern Saw-whet Owl is seldom seen. They are highly nocturnal, hunting from dawn to dusk and then roosting in the thick cover of conifers during the day, avoiding predators and birders alike. You may be more familiar with their piercing “too-too-too” calls that ring through the forest January through May as eager males try to attract mates and mark their breeding territories. These calls are repeated many times, sometimes for hours. It’s one of their calls that gave rise to their name, since settlers likened the sound to a whetting stone sharpening a saw. If you’re really keen on spotting a saw-whet, look for them under the dense cover of small conifers. They’re usually roosting relatively low to the ground, just above eye level (around 3 to 8 feet). Take note of the behavior of small songbirds as well. If they find a roosting saw-whet, songbirds will start mobbing the owl, calling and flying and making a ruckus, and exposing the location of the now irritated owl.

These three ounce balls of fury and feathers prefer mature forests with an open understory for hunting. They are often found in conifer forests, but can inhabit a variety of habitats, from swamps and riverside forests, to coastal scrub and the open shrub habitat of the west. People occasionally find them in urban areas and city parks, especially during migration. They have a fairly large range, living in forests all across the northern US, and in forests of southern Canada, western US and even central Mexico.
Their migration habits are still not well understood, and historically, people thought that saw-whets did not migrate. However, we now know that many saw-whet populations do in fact migrate and will winter in the forests of central and southern US, even crossing Great Lakes and other bodies of water. In the fall of 1999, a fisherman was very surprised to have a saw-whet land on his fishing vessel, 70 miles from shore in the Atlantic Ocean near Montauk, New York. About once every four years, saw-whets will also move southward in large numbers. That being said, not all saw-whets migrate, and upstate New York is home to some permanent resident saw-whets.

Males ring in the breeding season with their “too-too-too” calls beginning late January. An interested female will respond with a “tsst” call or whistle. The male then flies around her about twenty times before landing before her and presenting her with a token of his affection: a dead mouse. Saw-whet owls are cavity nesters, meaning they nest in previously made holes, often made by Northern flickers or pileated woodpeckers in dead snags. They’re usually monogamous during a breeding season, but will find a new mate each year. While the female incubates and broods her four to seven eggs, the male will do all of the hunting. However, when the nestlings are about 18 days old, the female decides she’s had enough and leaves the nest. She may roost elsewhere and continue to hunt for the chicks, or may leave entirely, sometimes starting a new clutch elsewhere. After that it’s up to dad to bring food to the chicks until they are about four to five weeks old.

Don’t be deceived by their adorable appearance; these owls are mighty predators. They mainly prey on mice, particularly deer mice, but will eat other small mammals like shrews, voles, bats, chipmunks, insects, and occasionally birds and other owl species. They hunt by lying in wait on low branches for an unsuspecting mouse, and then swoop down on their prey. Because of their small size, they often have to eat their prey in pieces and store leftovers on a nearby branch. Given the lack of microwaves in the forest, if their remaining food freezes, they can defrost their leftovers by incubating it like an egg. As a small owl, they are preyed upon by larger raptors including Great Horned Owls, Long-eared Owls, and hawks.

Saw-whets are generally common and widespread, but they are hard to study because they are nocturnal and secretive. There is much we still don’t fully know about their populations, distributions, movements and biology. Most populations are likely declining due to habitat loss of mature forests. These forests are very desirable for logging, but are also important saw-whet roosting habitat. If you own woodlands in their breeding range, you can help by allowing dead trees to remain and serve as nest cavities. They use nest boxes, so you might consider putting one up to attract a breeding pair (more info and specific nest box instructions can be found at https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/). Climate change may also cause habitat shifts affecting the southern range limit of saw-whet owls.

So keep your ears tuned for the sounds of saw-whets at night, and with a combination of luck, persistence and good observation skills, you might be rewarded a glimpse of these special owls.