



Mountain MIGRATION

Text and photos courtesy of Southern Appalachian Raptor Research

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hile camping near the A.T., shaded by high-altitude stands of spruce-fir in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, or high on Roan Mountain, one may hear a curious sound punctuating the night air from early March through late June. It could be described as an incessant “tooting” highlighted occasionally with plaintive wailing. Others might recall a large truck backing up at a construction site, or even the long-lost sound of a saw blade being sharpened or “whetted,” the traditional derivation of this uncommon bird with a most unusual name. The northern saw-whet owl, *Aegolius acadicus*, is eastern North America’s smallest owl, standing only six-to eight inches high and weighing a mere 75 to 100

grams — about the size of an American robin. This owl is currently listed as a threatened species in Tennessee, defined as both extremely rare and critically imperiled and is similarly listed as threatened in North Carolina — this includes one of the breeding areas of this tiny owl, Big Bald Mountain.

Clockwise from left: Volunteer Jesse Morris carefully picks a Canada warbler — one of the neotropical migrants that breeds at high altitudes along the A.T. — out of a mist net — photo by Nicolas Morris; A brown thrasher is released after banding and measuring; A saw-whet owl in his nesting box. Inset from top: Cape May warbler, sharp-shinned hawk, Coopers hawk — photos by James Petranka.

BIG BALD MOUNTAIN, RISING TO 5,516 FEET, and nearby surrounding habitat is predominantly high-altitude northern hardwood forest type. The presence of the saw-whet owl on Big Bald Mountain was documented in 1995, and volunteers from Southern Appalachian Raptor Research (SARR) have conducted monitoring efforts each autumn from 2005 through 2011 to determine if these owls were migrating through the Big Bald Mountain habitat. This migration monitoring data prompted the U.S. Forest Service and SARR to enhance the owls' nesting opportunities by placing nest boxes in the Big Bald Mountain habitat.

Southern Appalachian Raptor Research is a non-profit, volunteer group passionate about birds of all types and their habitats. SARR volunteers have been operating autumn songbird migration monitoring along the Appalachian Trail at Big Bald Mountain for the past 10 years, expanding on the early work of Dr. George and Cleo Mayfield, who started songbirds studies there in the late 1970s. SARR now operates three MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship — a nationwide program) stations, in cooperation with the Institute for Bird Populations, collecting data to monitor the health of the breeding bird communities at Big Bald and other habitats during the summer months. SARR volunteers also expanded migration monitoring at Big Bald Mountain to include raptor trapping, hawk watch, and public education efforts at Big Bald Banding Station with funding assistance from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the Tennessee Ornithological Society, the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, the U.S. Forest Service, North Carolina and Tennessee Wildlife programs, and many private donors.

Big Bald Banding Station (BBBS) is the bird migration monitoring and research program — operated by volunteers from SARR — in the southern Appalachian mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee during the months of September and October, and is one of very few banding stations in the U.S. that monitors and bands songbirds, raptors, and owls. An average of 2,000 passerines are captured, banded, and safely released during each autumn migration at Big Bald. A raptor trapping substation lures and bands approximately 100 birds of prey of 10 different species. The Big Bald Hawk



Volunteer, Emily Volk, holds a two-week-old chestnut-sided warbler after banding the fledgling during SARR's MAPS program in 2011; Local elementary school students learn about bird ecology at Vacation Bird School.

Watch commenced in 2004, documenting the passage of 15 different species of raptors annually. In the past eight autumns, Big Bald Hawk Watch has counted a total of 24,813 birds of prey, with an average seasonal total of 3,102 migrating raptors.

From early spring until late autumn, SARR volunteers help educate the public

about the migration and ecology of songbirds and raptors in the southern Appalachians. Hundreds of Appalachian Trail hikers passing through the Big Bald Banding Station have enjoyed the opportunity to release songbirds or look a bird of prey in the eye. High school biology students from area schools, teachers from the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching, and local bird clubs have also visited Big Bald for hands-on experiences with birds. Visits by Madison County and Buncombe County, North Carolina elementary school students have been an educational highlight in recent years. This July, SARR is conducting a week-long Vacation Bird School, designed to immerse late elementary school students into the world of southern Appalachian bird ecology. Activities include literature readings, creative writing, applied arts, nest searching, bird banding, and data collection techniques to help understand the ecology of birds in the southern Appalachian Mountains.

Big Bald Mountain has been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area program, and is part of the Southern Blue Ridge IBA, which includes several high altitude sites such as Roan Mountain, Unaka Mountain, and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This north-south corridor provides migratory, breeding, and wintering habitat for numerous bird species. If you keep your eyes and ears wide open during a trek along this section of the A.T. you might spot any number of magnificent winged wildlife, and, after dusk, you may just hear the very loud call of the tiny saw-whet owl. ⬆

For more information on Vacation Bird School, or how to participate in on-going monitoring visit Southern Appalachian Raptor Research at: www.bigbaldbanding.org.



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