



the Sand Bluff Birder

the official newsletter of the Sand Bluff Bird Observatory—online edition

August 2025

Spring 2025 Banding Report

Every banding season starts out with two questions: How is the weather going to be and will we have a good migration?

The spring of 2025 turned out to be a good year with very few cancellations and a nice migration. On March 25th Forest Preserves of Winnebago County conducted a prescribed burn for Colored Sands Forest Preserve and it was a good one. With the change of the prairie habitat from this burn, we captured rarely banded birds like Lark Sparrows and Savannah Sparrows.

New birds banded for the season totaled 1,810 birds representing 92 different species. The top five species were Slate-colored Juncos, American Robins, Gray Catbirds, White-throated Sparrows and American Tree Sparrows. Warblers again were very low in numbers, which is alarming. Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes arrived late so their numbers were low.

Two unusual captures occurred on the same morning in 2 separate nets. Both were birds of the night better known as Nightjars: a Common Nighthawk and an Eastern Whip-poor-will. It was nice to be able to compare them side by side. **Continued on page 2**

Northern Saw-whet Owl Motus Project at SBBO with U of I Ward Lab

—MICHAEL R AVARA

Avian Lab Manager & Field Coordinator

This past year (2024) was a very active one for Sand Bluff with regard to Motus and using radio telemetry to study patterns of migratory birds that call Colored Sands and Sugar River Alder Forest Preserves home for part of the year. In a previous newsletter, Lauren Brunk highlighted work that was done with Wood Thrushes. In this article, I'll describe work that was done with Northern Saw-whet Owls.

As many might know or remember from educational programming done at Sand Bluff, Northern Saw-whet Owls (NSWOs) are small migratory raptors that breed in the boreal forests of Canada and the northern United States. Every fall, these birds migrate to points south—including Illinois—to pass the winter in 'warmer' areas. Many questions exist about this time during the nonbreeding season: How long do NSWO stay at a migratory stopover site? How far south do NSWO migrate? When do birds return north in the spring? How actively do birds move on the landscape during migratory stopover?



Mike Avara and Chad Cremer attach a Motus transmitter to a Northern Saw-whet Owl.

In fall of 2024, members of the Ward Lab at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign working with SBBO staff captured nine owls and fitted them with Motus transmitters on two different weekends—10/12/24 and 10/26/24—to collect data to better understand the movements of these owls. Four of these tags were funded by Sand Bluff Bird Observatory with the remaining being funded by a grant from the Illinois Ornithological Society. Only one of the birds was a male, while six were female, and two were unknown sex. Five birds were SY birds, two were HY birds, and two were ASY birds.

We were concerned about the detection range for our antennas on top of the hawk watch station so we also installed a 40' tower at Sugar River Alder. As it turned out, this was a smart decision—because of the topography of the bluff, only two owls were detected from the hawk watch station. NSWO tend to be skulky and move through thick understory in the shadow of the bluffs in the river bottoms. This high spot also allowed us to determine when owls flew higher and moved out of the area.

Eight of the nine owls left the area within five days of their capture. One hearty owl (#546) decided to stay for a majority of the winter (61 days!). The figure shows her movements over the season. The color shows what direction she was from the tower at Sugar River Alder. The fact that the signal strength goes up and down indicates that her roost location was changing—closer (higher number) and further (lower number) from the tower throughout the season. Most of her time was spent to the north of the tower possibly in Avon Bottoms just north of the state line. Attempts were made to hand track her, but public access and the terrain confounded these efforts. NSWO#546 was last detected on 2/12/25.

Interestingly, none of the owls tagged at Sand Bluff were detected at any Motus stations outside the site, however, the tag battery is expected to last two years, so there is still time! While there are relatively few stations in Wisconsin west of Lake Michigan to detect spring northward migration from Sand Bluff, the number of Motus stations in Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri has greatly increased such that a detection on the return migration south this fall is quite possible.

Owls were also captured and tagged at Kennekuk County Park (Danville, IL), Allerton Park (Monticello, IL), Jubilee Farm (Springfield, IL), and Cedar Grove Ornithological Research Station as part of a larger longer term project tracking migration of NSWO and examining their activity patterns during the nonbreeding season.

Spring 2025, continued from page 1

Retraps (birds banded in previous or current seasons) totaled 707 representing 54 species, American Robins and Gray Catbirds topped the list. The number of birds from past years was 329 meaning they are at least 1 year since being banded or more. One Chipping Sparrow was originally banded in 2016, making it over 8 years old. Returning this year was a Wood Thrush with a Motus tag put on in June 2024. This bird migrated to the tropics and returned to the same nesting area near the station.

Now that the fall season approaches it is time to thank all the volunteers for their hard work and time. We also can't forget the wonderful donors that give so generously so that we can do what we do.

Until next newsletter HAPPY BIRDING and come visit the banding station,
 ——— Mike Eickman President

SPECIES	COUNT	SPECIES	COUNT	SPECIES	COUNT
BLACKBIRD, RED-WINGED	1	OWL, NORTHERN SAW-WHET	9	VIREO, YELLOW-THROATED	1
BLUEBIRD, EASTERN	19	PARULA, NORTHERN	1	WARBLER, BAY-BREASTED	0
BUNTING, INDIGO	14	PEEWEE, EASTERN WOOD	1	WARBLER, BLACK AND WHITE	4
CARDINAL, NORTHERN	22	PHOEBE, EASTERN	16	WARBLER, BLACKBURNIAN	0
CATBIRD, GRAY	131	REDSTART, AMERICAN	16	WARBLER, BLACKPOLL	4
CHAT, YELLOW-BREASTED	0	ROBIN, AMERICAN	157	WARBLER, BLACK-THROATED BLUE	0
CHICKADEE, BLACK-CAPPED	16	SANDPIPER, SOLITARY	0	WARBLER, BLACK-THROATED GREEN	3
COWBIRD, BROWN-HEADED	14	SAPSUCKER, YELLOW-BELLIED	3	WARBLER, BLUE-WINGED	2
CREEPER, BROWN	14	SPARROW, AMERICAN TREE	53	WARBLER, CANADA	10
CUCKOO, BLACK-BILLED	0	SPARROW, CHIPPING	21	WARBLER, CAPE MAY	0
CUCKOO, YELLOW-BILLED	0	SPARROW, CLAY-COLORED	0	WARBLER, CHESTNUT-SIDED	5
DOVE, MOURNING	2	SPARROW, FIELD	31	WARBLER, CONNECTICUT	0
FINCH, HOUSE	0	SPARROW, FOX	41	WARBLER, GOLDEN-WINGED	4
FINCH, PURPLE	0	SPARROW, GRASSHOPPER	0	WARBLER, HOODED	1
FLICKER, YELLOW-SHAFTED	20	SPARROW, HENSLOW'S	0	WARBLER, KENTUCKY	1
FLYCATCHER, ACADIAN	0	SPARROW, LARK	16	WARBLER, MAGNOLIA	43
FLYCATCHER, GREAT-CRESTED	0	SPARROW, LINCOLN'S	2	WARBLER, MOURNING	4
FLYCATCHER, LEAST	18	SPARROW, SAVANNAH	2	WARBLER, MYRTLE	18
FLYCATCHER, OLIVE-SIDED	0	SPARROW, SONG	13	WARBLER, NASHVILLE	22
FLYCATCHER, TRAILL'S	23	SPARROW, SWAMP	38	WARBLER, ORANGE-CROWNED	7
FLYCATCHER, YELLOW-BELLIED	6	SPARROW, VESPER	0	WARBLER, PINE	0
GNATCATCHER, BLUE-GRAY	0	SPARROW, WHITE-CROWNED	15	WARBLER, PROTHONOTARY	0
GOLDFINCH, AMERICAN	30	SPARROW, WHITE-THROATED	124	WARBLER, TENNESSEE	11
GRACKLE, COMMON	0	SWALLOW, CLIFF	1	WARBLER, WESTERN PALM	14
GROSBEAK, BLUE	0	SWALLOW, TREE	4	WARBLER, WILSON'S	5
GROSBEAK, ROSE-BREASTED	47	TANAGER, SCARLET	3	WARBLER, YELLOW	1
HAWK, COOPER'S	0	TANAGER, SUMMER	0	WATERTHRUSH, NORTHERN	9
HAWK, RED-TAILED	0	THRASHER, BROWN	19	WAXWING, CEDAR	12
HAWK, SHARP-SHINNED	3	THRUSH, GRAY-CHEEKED	9	WHIP-POOR-WILL, EASTERN	1
JAV, BLUE	25	THRUSH, HERMIT	34	WOODCOCK, AMERICAN	3
JUNCO, OREGON	1	THRUSH, SWAINSON'S	34	WOODPECKER, DOWNY	8
JUNCO, SLATE-COLORED	300	THRUSH, WOOD	7	WOODPECKER, HAIRY	2
KINGBIRD, EASTERN	3	TITMOUSE, TUFTED	2	WOODPECKER, RED-HEADED	1
KINGLET, GOLDEN-CROWNED	40	TOWHEE, EASTERN	6	WOODPECKER, RED-BELLIED	3
KINGLET, RUBY-CROWNED	39	VEERY	26	WREN, CAROLINA	1
MEADOWLARK, EASTERN	0	VIREO, BELL'S	0	WREN, NORTHERN HOUSE	22
NIGHTHAWK, COMMON	1	VIREO, BLUE-HEADED	2	WREN, WINTER	6
NUTHATCH, WHITE-BREASTED	4	VIREO, PHILADELPHIA	2	YELLOWTHROAT, COMMON	21
ORIOLE, BALTIMORE	24	VIREO, RED-EYED	6		
ORIOLE, ORCHARD	12	VIREO, WHITE-EYED	0		
OVENBIRD	19	VIREO, WARBLING	7	SPRING 2025 TOTAL NEW BIRDS	1810
				SPRING 2025 TOTAL RETRAPS	707

PLEASE HELP US ... in any way you can

Our non-profit organization survives because of private contributions of time and money from friends just like you. Please examine the list below and help us continue our important banding program by making your contribution!

Please return this form to: Sand Bluff Bird Observatory, P. O. Box 2, Seward, IL 61077 or donate through PayPal on our website: sandbluff.org

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Enclosed is a (tax-deductible) contribution of | <input type="checkbox"/> Enclosed is a (tax-deductible) donation of _____ |
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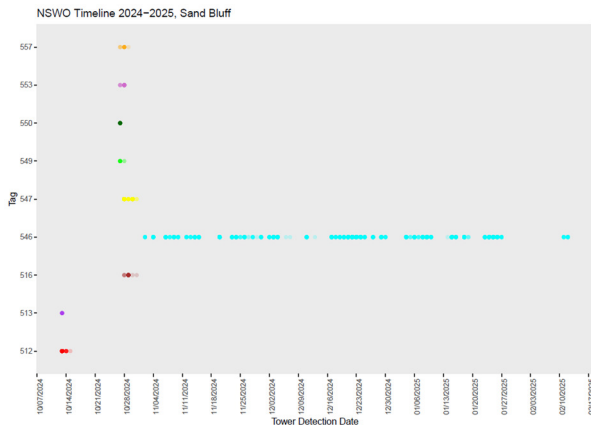
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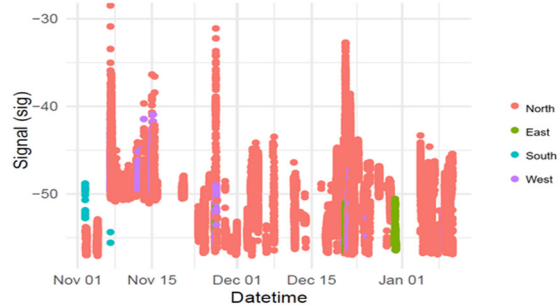
Telephone (days) _____ (evenings) _____ (email) _____

The SBBO website "www.sandbluff.org" has been updated with more options. You can now make a secure online donation through PayPal by selecting the "Support Us" page when you click on the "list" icon in the upper right corner of the website's homepage. There is also a SBBO t-shirt in multiple colors and sizes available to order online through PayPal on the "Merchandise" page.



The above deployment timeline shows the dates that each of the nine NSWO tagged at SBBO in Winnebago County. Only one owl stayed for most of the winter (tag 546).

NSWO, continued from page 1



The above plot shows the movements of NSWO#546 over the course of the winter season at SBBO in Winnebago County. The large amount of red in the plot shows that the bird was usually

I want to express a sincere thank you to Mike Eickman, Ivy Otto, and the rest of the SBBO crew that helped with netting operations as well as Chad Cremer, Grant Witynski, Lauren Brunk, and Sadie Dainko (BBL subpermittees for the Ward Lab). Thank you to Sand Bluff Bird Observatory and

Illinois Ornithological Society for providing funding for Motus tags—this funding made this research possible.

If this article piqued your interest, consider checking out:

Motus: This website provides location information for all birds tagged and detected flying in/near/by Sand Bluff and other Motus stations across the world.

Ward Lab of Ornithology: This website provides information about the research we are doing with NSWO at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Project OwlNet: This website provides background about the larger NSWO banding research and network across Canada and the United States.

Sand Bluff 2025 Scholarship Recipients

Congratulations to Brock Bottcher, Madelynn Kolthoff and Anna Polasky, this year's recipients of the Sand Bluff Bird Observatory Scholarships through the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois. Brock is a second time winner of the \$500 Lee and Lynda Johnson Founders Scholarship. Anna received the \$500 Dave Seal Volunteers Scholarship and Madelynn received the \$500 Environmental Studies Scholarship.

Brock will continue with his studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, pursuing a degree in Environmental Sciences while Anna will be beginning her studies in Environmental Science there. Madelynn will be attending the University of Wisconsin-Platteville to pursue a degree in Ecological Restoration.

We are proud to support Brock, Madelynn, and Anna's commitment to preserving the environment and wish them success in the future.

Part of the mission of Sand Bluff Bird Observatory is to support education. The three scholarships are just one way in which that mission is supported. Interested in donating to the scholarship fund? Visit <https://cfnil.fcsuite.com/erp/donate> and search for Sand Bluff Bird Observatory Inc. Scholarships.

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Another Northern Saw-whet Owl is banded at SBBO. See page 1

Weather permitting, nets will be raised August 9-10 for the fall migration season with banding beginning the following weekend. Too hot or raining? Move forward one week!

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLASSES AND GROUPS

This fall, SBBO is allowing small groups and drop-in visitors to observe banding. Thursday or weekend mornings, groups of 10 –15 can schedule a “group presentation”. Smaller groups may join the general visitors.

Call Kathy Hoel, 815-877-2938 or e-mail kathyhoel6@gmail.com/subject: SBBO group visit, for details and to reserve your spot. Allow 1½ hours to watch the banding process and visit the nets.



Photo by Thelma Bottum

Donations are gratefully accepted.

Here's How To Reach Us!

During Operating Hours: 815-629-2671

Mailing Address: Sand Bluff Bird Observatory
P. O. Box 2
Seward, IL 61077

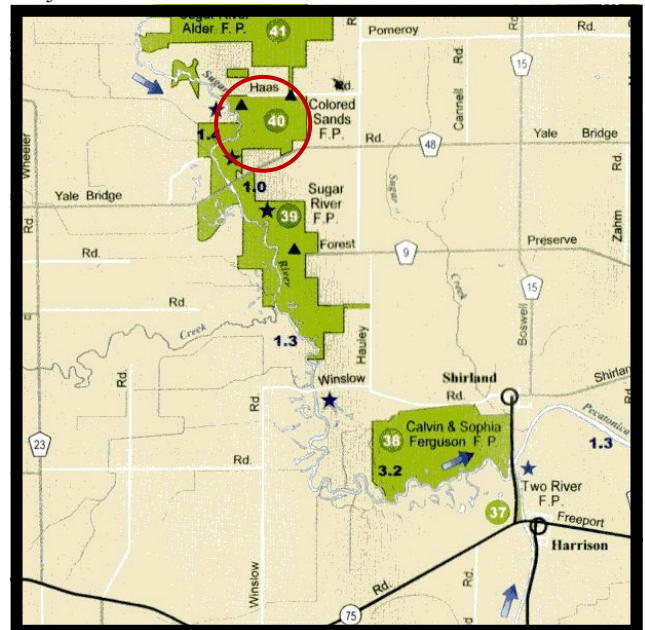
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