

First survey of nocturnal raptors at Parc national des Monts-Valin

By Marie-Hélène Hachey, Park Warden-Naturalist, Parc national des Monts-Valin

Created in September 1996, Parc national des Monts-Valin is still young. Recently, several steps were taken to better identify the park's avifauna. Among these efforts, a survey of nocturnal raptors was carried out in the summer of 2006 and made it possible to increase to 132 the number of bird species found in the park. The 132nd species, the boreal owl, was a pleasant discovery, given the northern character of Parc national des Monts-Valin.

Boreal owl

A small owl of the boreal forest, the boreal owl (*Aegolius funereus*) has a brown plumage, a yellowish beak and a pale facial disk with a black border. A little bigger than the northern saw-whet owl, this species measures 23 cm to 35 cm in size. While it is an official resident of the conifer forests of the north, the boreal owl makes irregular migrations towards the mixed forests of the south. Despite its occasional incursions and the presence of a few nesting pairs, this small owl is rare in the Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean region as well as throughout southern Québec.

Beginning at the end of April, the male sings a soft, mysterious song made up of the same note repeated several times; this song likely explains this species' Latin name *funereus*, or funereal in English. It is during this period that the odds of hearing the boreal owl are greatest.

Methodology and results

During two evenings, one in June, the other in July, three nocturnal raptors were heard in the park: two northern saw-whet owls in a mixed forest at the foot of the mountain, and a boreal owl in a mature spruce stand at 700 m in altitude. The survey was carried out using the following method: at each station, there was a three-minute listening period, following by the playing of a recording, followed by another listening period. In order to avoid scaring small owls by playing the song of a bigger owl, the species were "called" by increasing order of size: northern saw-whet owl, boreal owl, barred owl and great horned owl.

As for the results obtained, two hypotheses might explain the small number of specimens surveyed. First, the surveys were carried out late in the season, after the period when birds sing the most. Secondly, it is possible that the nocturnal raptor populations were at the low point of a cycle, in response to the fluctuations in small mammal populations. Whatever the case may be, the first mention of the boreal owl on the park's territory makes up for these modest results.